Love of a Particular Kind

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Love of a Particular Kind

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Summary

People say Clint Barton is the pickiest omega in SHIELD. Fortunately, Phil Coulson loves a challenge.

Notes

deep breath Okay. So. This story is rooted in many things, but notably inspired by the wonderful "Scents and Sensibility" in that, after I read that hilarious "omegaverse except based on clownfish" AU, I thought, why not do other takes on omegaverse that are based on other kinds of animals? Combine that with a recurring inside joke between me and Kathar about what "mating displays" would look like if people courted in the same ways that birds do, and you get.... a novella that is sort of wingfic and sort of omegaverse but also sort of neither.

Basically the idea here is that this is a world where people evolved off the bird/reptile branch of the tree instead of the primate one. It's also my take at trope subversion for a lot of the "classic" omegaverse tropes. But fundamentally, it's a big smooshy romantic love story.

The traits of what I jokingly refer to as *homo avis* are sort of loosely based in science, in that they are mostly based off of real bird or reptile behaviors and anatomy, but they aren't really found all in one species in real life and I have taken copious artistic license. I have a ton of background notes about them, though, so feel free to ask if you want to know more or if anything is confusing.

This story is completely drafted and betaed and will be posting chapter-by-chapter as I finish editing each section.

See the end of the work for more notes

- Inspired by Scents and Sensibility: The Working Assassin's Guide to Supersoldier Seduction by galwednesday, silentwalrus, skellerbvvt

The Pickiest Omega In SHIELD

Clint's day was not going well.

It wasn't exactly going *badly,* but his eight AM briefing had become an eleven AM briefing because something something videoconferencing service outage. Then, to add insult to injury, the briefing had proceeded to go way over its scheduled time, so that in addition to having come in early for nothing, Clint and Natasha and Phil hadn't made it to lunch until after three.

Three PM in the SHIELD cafeteria was one of the Sad Mealtimes; they were clearing out the last of lunch service before closing down for an hour to do the dinner turnover, so your choices were limited to whatever picked over and unappealing items were still left. It wasn't the kind of food anyone would choose, but sometimes you just had to make do with what was on offer.

Clint chewed his dried-out lasagna morosely and looked around. About the only people there besides the three of them and the cafeteria staff were a group of quinjet pilots sitting in the corner (it was time for quarterly flight recerts) and the other agents who'd been in Clint's briefing, a group of juniors who were supposed to be shadowing Strike Team Delta on a low-level mission for on-the-job training. They went around in a little flock—they'd gotten tight at the Academy, apparently—and were a bit over-excitable, but good chicks.

One of the pilots—a tall alpha with a cocky grin—stood up, to raucous encouragement from his friends, and went over to the juniors' table. He stopped in front of Agent Mendez, a tiny omega with a cherubic face. She had a mouth that could blister paint, a sharpshooter's eye, and a sneaky talent for dirty fighting; she was secretly Clint's favorite of all the trainees and he was considering suggesting her for some additional sniper development training.

The pilot set something down at Mendez' elbow; a plate holding a forlorn piece of pie. It had broken while being served and the crust was burned a little at the edge, obviously one of the cafeteria's end-of-the-lunch-rush leftovers.

"Hey, Amy," the pilot said. He put his hands on his hips and puffed his chest up a little.

"Hi…. Brad?" Mendez said. She put one finger on the edge of the pie plate and pulled it toward herself about half an inch.

"Brent," the pilot said. "So hey, I was thinking, Crackle's having an Eighties Night tomorrow, wanna go?"

Mendez glanced at him, her sharp eyes flicking down, then up, then shrugged. "Why not," she said. "Meet you there at nine?"

"Cool, yeah," he said. "See you then." He turned and went back to his table, high-fiving the other pilots.

“Ugh,” Clint muttered, poking at a limp green bean. “She shouldn’t give him the time of day.”

Phil looked up from where he was disassembling his sandwich to pick off the worst bits. “Oh?”

“Why not?” Natasha picked a wilted lettuce leaf out of her salad. “He’s not bad looking.”

“Didn’t you *smell* him? He must have practically bathed in Triple-A Body Spray or something. Plus, did you see that sad excuse for tribute? Amy’s gluten-free, she doesn’t even *eat* pie.”

Phil looked like he agreed, but Natasha shrugged. “She didn’t seem to mind,” she pointed out, loading her fork with a precisely calculated combination of salad ingredients. “She did accept the invitation, after all. A lot of people feel like a big display is too much for a first date. It can seem a little try-hard.”

“Sure,” Phil said, nudging some limp vegetables to the side of his plate and reassembling his sandwich. “But tribute they can’t even use seems pretty bottom-of-the-barrel.”

“Right,” Clint said stubbornly. “It’s the principle of the thing. You want someone’s attention, you ought to court them properly. None of this half-assed thing people try to pull nowadays.” He took an annoyed bite of crunchy noodles that nature never intended to crunch. “You know Agent James tried to proposition me last week with half a granola bar?”

“Clint, I think everyone in SHIELD knows that by now.” Nat patted his shoulder, then reached around to scritch the base of his neck.

“I mean, he was still chewing the other half!” Clint said. “What kind of message does that even send?”

“It doesn’t speak well for his powers of observation,” Phil allowed.

“That’s putting it mildly,” Natasha said. “I think Sitwell put him in remedial social engineering training for ‘trying to seal the deal with the pickiest omega in SHIELD with half an oatmeal raisin bar.’”

“Oatmeal fucking *raisin*,” Clint said in disgust. “I *ask* you. Wait, what d’you mean, the pickiest omega in SHIELD?”

“Sitwell said it, not me,” Natasha said.

“I just have high standards.” Clint gave up on the rest of his lunch and turned to his brownie. “I am fucking self-actualized, okay, and I want what I want. Fuck knows it took me long enough to get there.”

“And that’s absolutely legitimate,” Phil said.

“Yes, you’ve worked very hard,” Natasha agreed, in that way she had sometimes where she sounded like she was giving you shit but her eyes told you she was being serious. “And if

you want to hold out for a big romantic gesture, that's your prerogative. But if you do, you're not allowed to keep complaining to us about being single."

"Aw, but what else is flock for?" Clint batted his eyes at her, then winced when she dug her nails into his skin, just a fraction. "Ow! Put the talons away, woman, fine. Point taken. I'll stop complaining if you'll stop installing Nestr on my phone, that shit's just depressing."

"Fine, no more mating apps," Natasha agreed, starting to gather up her dishes. "Now finish your lunch, I've got to run. I have that thing with Hill in ten minutes."

Clint got thoughtful as he nibbled around the edges of his brownie. The thing was, okay, the thing was, he hadn't always been so picky.

He'd never thought about mating much, as a chick. He and Barney were an only brood, and after their parents had died they'd been focused on survival, moving between foster colonies sometimes every few months until Barney'd taken them to Carson's.

Clint had *loved* the circus. It'd been full of light and color and flash and sparkle, with plenty of chances for a couple of half-fledged chicks to get up high and jump off things, to swoop around and feel the wind. The work was hard, but Clint didn't mind it. And then one day Trickshot had seen him playing around with the darts from the midway and put a bow in his hand, and everything after had unfolded from that moment.

There'd been a time when Clint was a headliner, sixteen and stewing in hormones and feeling invincible. He'd come out of the ring sweaty and high on adrenaline and there would be *heaps* of tribute, townies of all stripes and sometimes circus folk too bringing trinkets and treats and lekking outside the dressing rooms, scenting him with their mouths hanging just a little too open for polite society, jostling each other for his attention. He hadn't actually slept with any of them—he'd shared a trailer with Barney and Barney was not interested in vacating—but he'd had his share of sloppy makeouts and dry-humps behind the big top. The best part wasn't even the orgasms, it was the feel of it: being something people wanted, something to strive for.

Then his life with the circus had all fallen apart, and Clint was too busy patching himself back together and trying to survive to worry about romance. Sometimes when the loneliness got too much, or when he had a little breakthrough hormone surge despite his suppression implant, he'd go out to a lek club and display some, find someone to hook up with, but as far as he was concerned, long-term mating—let alone actually bonding—was off the table for him.

By the time Fury'd hauled Clint into SHIELD, giving him a recruitment pitch instead of the life sentence or bullet he'd expected, Clint'd gone brittle, paranoid and wary: more likely to slink around in the shadows than to be the center of attention. Unfortunately (or so he'd thought at the time), SHIELD had a therapy requirement for its active field agents.

He'd stuck out weekly sessions with Dr. Garner in silence for nearly two months before he finally gave in and started talking. And eventually… it had helped. He'd examined his assumptions, he'd processed his emotions, he'd thought about how his past traumas informed his present attitudes… by the time Clint had hit Level 3, he'd actually become decently well-

adjusted, pretty stable and pretty happy. And he'd started thinking, maybe instead of taking what he could get, it was time to start holding out for what he *wanted*.

And then Agent Bobbi Morse had bribed Geoff in the kitchens to deep-fry Clint a corndog and handed it to him, and her scent had gone all alpha-spicy and creamy like she was a chai latte, and she'd stood in display in front of him and asked him out, and he'd felt something in him waking up.

It had been really good, until it wasn't. Not anyone's fault, really; they just weren't compatible, in the long term. Sexually, sure, and in field work, absolutely, and as friends, without a doubt—but Bobbi'd grown up with a normal family, had a normal life, and she expected Clint to be normal too, in ways he didn't realize he wasn't until they tripped over it.

When they finally broke it off for good, Clint spent about three weeks being depressed about it and then got called into a meeting with Fury. The Director had completely ignored Clint's sorry state in favor of telling him that he was getting promoted again, moving out of the general agent pool and into the specialist track. He'd be paired with one of Fury's other protégées, a guy who Clint had heard of but never met: Phil Coulson.

Clint was still miserable, of course—he and Bobbi hadn't developed a bond, but they'd still been mates and he'd still loved her—but the challenge of doing something new was a great distraction from his misery, as well as a great excuse for any busybodies who felt like urging him to jump back into the dating pool before he was ready. Moving up to Level 4 was genuinely tough, with lots of new training to take and skills to acquire. It also meant Clint had to learn how to work with a single partner, instead of getting pulled in to support whatever op needed an acrobatic sniper that week, and that ended up being the most significant change of all.

Phil had started out cordial but a little formal, always calling Clint "Agent Barton" and keeping a respectful distance. Clint had appreciated it at first; he had kind of an uneven history with alphas, especially double-As like Phil, and wasn't exactly keen on having one he didn't know all up in his business. But after a couple sparring sessions, Phil had loosened up sufficiently to take Clint to the mat with a move that was absolutely filthy cheating. Clint had crowed in delight—as much as he could from where he was being bent into a pretzel—and told Phil to call him by his first name, and they'd pretty much been friends ever since.

His new job and new partner—partner*s*, once Natasha came along—hadn't exactly healed his heartbreak, but they'd given him something else to think about while his heart healed on its own, and Clint would always be grateful to Fury for his excellent (and probably not accidental) timing.

In the last year or so, Clint had started thinking about maybe getting back out there again, the hurts of the past finally healed enough to be outweighed by his hopes for the future. His scent must have gone more inviting or something, because he started getting tributes pretty quickly; he found himself slower to accept than he used to be, though, more reluctant this time.

He knew that lots of people didn't want to start out very serious in a new relationship, and he actually understood why. But even though, once he really let himself think about it, he did

want to mate again, he was still a little gun-shy. If he was gonna risk his heart, this time he wanted to know that the person he was risking it with was just as invested in the whole thing as Clint was. He tried not to think of it as "mutually-assured destruction"—this was dating, not nuclear proliferation—but the metaphor felt pretty apt.

He'd dated a little, here and there, and even gone lekking a time or two; sometimes you really just needed to get an itch scratched. He wanted something more than just orgasms, though, and he wanted it with someone who cared enough about Clint—Clint himself, specifically, not just as a default hangout or an on-call fuck—to put some genuine effort in. It wasn't just the romantic gestures, no matter what Natasha thought; it was what the gestures signified. It was the *giving a shit*.

Clint sighed, picking over his lunch dishes in case he'd missed anything worth eating.

"Clint? Everything okay?"

He looked over at Phil, smiling at the worried little crease between his brows. That was the thing, right there: nobody who had offered Clint tribute so far this whole time had ever shown a quarter of the sincere care and concern that Phil—and Nat, in her own way—showed him every day. Why would Clint settle for less in his romantic life than he had in his friendships?

"I'm fine," he told Phil with a smile. "Just off in the clouds."

It *would* be nice to have a mate again, though. He missed the little things, sharing a bower and a nest with someone, getting tribute gifts that were specially chosen with him in mind, curling up and preening each other on the couch while you watched TV… regular sex with someone who knew you intimately, knew what you liked and didn't, where to touch you and how to kiss you, someone you could touch and kiss in return. Of course, Clint's current bower wasn't much set up for sharing. After he and Bobbi broke up, he'd just moved into one of SHIELD's subsidized colonies of tiny studio bowers for junior agents, and he hadn't really done much to furnish it besides make an IKEA run and call it a day.

"Do you think I should move?" he asked abruptly.

Phil blinked at him. "Maybe?" he said. "What brought this on?"

"I was just thinking about what Nat said, about me complaining about dating and all," he explained. "And my place… it's, like, a sad breakup bower, you know?"

"I wouldn't exactly say that," Phil said, in a tone that meant he pretty much *would* exactly say that if he wasn't reluctant to be rude. "Though it's true it's not the most, er, welcoming bower I've ever seen. Those colonies are really meant for people who're out on missions the majority of the time."

"I mean, I got the money to get something nicer," Clint said. "I just never really bothered. But I was thinking, maybe if I made my personal life more of a focus, it would help me attract other people who value the same thing? I mean, that's what Cosmo would say, probably."

Phil made a face. “I hardly think that’s a good source of intel,” he said. “I think you should choose your home based on what *you* want. If you want something nicer, you absolutely deserve it. But if you’re happy where you are, you shouldn’t uproot yourself on the off chance someone will like you better in a different bower. Anybody worth your time would take you as you are.”

Clint couldn’t help smiling at Phil, feeling warm and accepted and good at Phil’s steadfast refusal to consider that Clint wasn’t a perfectly good romantic prospect as-is. “I think maybe I ought to move,” he said. “Not for some imaginary date, but for me. Hell, I could get a place with a real living room, have the flock over for movie night and offer you somewhere to sit besides the edge of my bed.”

“Then do it,” Phil said. “And let me know if you need a hand with anything, you know I’m happy to help.” He looked like he was about to say something else, but then his phone rang and he let out an annoyed little huff before answering it with his normal crisp “Coulson.”

The conversation was apparently urgent enough that Phil made an apologetic face and gestured at his dishes, asking through strategic eyebrows if Clint could take Phil’s along with his own. Clint nodded and shooed him away, then looked at his watch and sighed. He had a meeting coming up, and then he had to do his own quinjet recertifications. He bussed his and Phil’s trays and headed out, wondering if either of his flock knew a good realtor.

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Clint got surprisingly into the whole moving thing over the next few weeks, dragging colony listings into Phil’s office and making Phil and Nat advise him on whether it was better to get a bower that was “cozy” or “bustling with city life.” (Apparently, in real estate listing speak, that meant “stupid tiny” and “poorly insulated and on top of the train station,” respectively.) Eventually he just dragged them along with him to look at apartments, not bothering to correct listing agents who assumed they were all mates; they tended to get that a lot, and it’s not like the assumption was anything but flattering. Anyone would be proud to be seen with Clint’s flock; they were smart and hot and deadly.

Well, probably the leasing agents didn’t realize the deadly part, but it was definitely part of their charm as far as Clint was concerned.

He finally settled on a nice place, shabby but with good bones, in a colony building mostly full of students and small families. After some paint and a good cleaning, Phil and Nat helped him pack up his old place and the SHIELD movers brought all the boxes over. Nat got sent on a solo mission the day before the move, but Phil still came to help Clint unpack; he even stuck around to help him assemble his furniture, which was true friendship.

It was almost nine when they finally finished, and even though Clint felt gritty and sweaty and exhausted, he was happy; looking around, he could already see how much more this place suited him, with his longbow on the wall and the overstuffed purple velvet armchair

he'd splurged on and his books and DVDs on real shelves. He and Phil collapsed wearily at Clint's new little table for post-move celebratory pizza and beer, and for a while there wasn't any noise other than eating.

It was great to be at home with your flock, Clint thought. People who only knew Agent Coulson would be shocked to see him now, sitting at Clint's table in ratty jeans and an old Captain America t-shirt, with a streak of mystery grease across his cheek, looking tired but satisfied and comfortable. It filled Clint's chest with a big, warm feeling; maybe, he thought, it was the opposite of being homesick.

"I, ah, I got you a bower-warming gift," Phil said, once they'd demolished the pizza and were mainly sitting around nibbling on crusts.

"Aw, Phil, you didn't have to do that," Clint said, though he couldn't hold back his pleased grin. "You've done so much already!"

"I wanted to," Phil said. "It's nothing big, I just saw them and thought—well, here." He got up and went to where he'd dropped off his stuff in the corner, coming back with a big gift bag that Clint had somehow not noticed him bringing inside. Probably Phil had used spy tricks; it was the sort of thing he'd do.

Clint took the bag from Phil's hands, his heartbeat speeding up. He didn't know why he was so nervous; it wasn't like Phil would ever get him, like, a *mean* present. Probably it was just because this was his first bower-warming present, for the first bower he'd gone out and chosen for himself because he liked it and not because it was cheap, or free, or because none of the neighbors would notice suspicious activities. The first time he'd ever put effort into making himself a *home*.

"I've never had a bower-warming present before," Clint said. The bag was really pretty, with a sort of flocked design, and Clint couldn't help petting over the velvety texture.

Phil, inexplicably, smelled nervous; it was weird. Phil normally didn't smell like much unless he needed to for a mission or something had gone all the way to shit; he had pretty tight control on his pheromones—as befitted a super-spy—plus Clint was pretty sure he wore scent-damping cologne usually. "I… hope it isn't a disappointment."

"Of course not, it's from you," Clint said, surprised. He reached down inside the bag and pulled out a biggish, squashy shape wrapped in tissue paper. Unwrapped, it revealed itself to be a pair of gorgeous cushions. They were just the right size to tuck behind the small of your back, and embroidered all over in vivid shades of blue and purple, sequins and little mirrors and beads scattered through the pattern like stars. They were different textures, too, silky and wooly, and the backs of the cushions were velvet. "Phil," Clint said, feeling breathless. "They're *awesome*." He kept turning them over and petting them, tracing lines of the design. "I gotta—here, let me—" he got up and went over to the living room, almost knocking over a beer as he turned, and set the cushions at either side of his new gray sofa. It instantly made the room look about a hundred percent better. More homey, more *him*. Unique and distinct and…

Wait.

“You ‘just saw them’?” Clint raised an eyebrow, and Phil’s ears turned pink.

“I did! I mean, granted, I was in Madripoor at the time,” Phil said. “But I just, I thought they looked like… you.”

Clint remembered Phil being in Madripoor; it had been a mission, and he’d come back with six stitches above his eye. Six stitches, and apparently a present for Clint’s new place. He beamed at Phil.

“That’s, like, the nicest thing anyone’s ever bought me,” he said, and the pink on Phil’s ears deepened.

“I’m glad,” Phil said, and he looked so sheepish and yet so pleased that Clint just wanted to hug him.

They didn’t actually hug much, him and Phil. It wasn’t that Clint didn’t want to—he more or less only had two modes with other people, “don’t touch me” or “touch me all the time”—but he knew that he didn’t always have the same understanding of personal boundaries that other people did, so he tended to default to letting other people set the pace when it came to contact.

Nat had been relatively easy; she’d been standoffish for several months, until one day she’d come in for a briefing smelling faintly sweet and citrusy, like welcome and curiosity, and flopped down on her stomach on the couch in Phil’s office, pillowing her head on Clint’s leg and poking him until he started preening her long, silky crest. Ever since then, she’d treated him almost like an extension of herself, and every time she’d lean on him or preen him or otherwise allow him in her bubble, he’d feel a flush of warmth and affection and pride.

Phil, though. Phil was different; he’d always been different. He wasn’t cold, not by any means, but he was… contained, more likely to offer a smile and a shoulder clasp than an embrace. Clint had wondered, sometimes, if they were both waiting for the other.

Well, the bower was working out okay so far. Maybe it was time for Clint to start taking more chances.

“Aw, c’mere,” he said, and opened his arms. Phil startled a bit, then ducked his head and stepped into the hug.

It was… good. It *felt* good, felt *right*; Phil was rumpled and warm and solid against him, and it felt like a rare privilege to be allowed so near. Phil either wasn’t wearing his scent-damper or it had worn off; this close, Clint allowed himself a little sip of scent, a sort of toasty-warm woody smell that reached right into his hindbrain and whispered *happy-safe-flock*. He liked it. Honestly, he kind of wanted to stay there forever, which was a good sign that it was time to let go.

Clint gave Phil a good squeeze that made him grunt a little, then stepped back, not wanting to embarrass him any more than he already had. “Thank you,” he said warmly. “Seriously. Thank you for everything.”

“It was my pleasure,” Phil said softly.

Seriously, Clint’s flock was the *greatest.*

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Clint had taken a long weekend to get moved, and when he made it back to work he was stiff and sore, but satisfied; he was unpacked and his furniture was together and he’d gone and bought new bedding in colors that matched Phil’s cushions, so that if he wanted to he could put them on the sofa or in his nest. He was in a good mood, especially after teaching a guest session on free-climbing to one of the junior agent training cohorts; he hadn’t been on a mission in a while, so it was nice to have the chance to spread his wings.

“Nice work, Barton,” someone said, and Clint turned away from the junior he was giving a few last pointers to and toward the speaker. He knew the guy a little, an alpha who taught a lot of the intermediate survival courses; Daniel or Denny or something. Wait, no, Dennis. Dennis Keith. Or possibly Keith Dennis; one or the other. Clint took a step to the side like he was getting around the crowd, so he could catch a glimpse of his badge. Agent K. Dennis, okay then.

“Thanks, Dennis,” Clint said. “It’s good to keep my hand in.”

“For sure.” Dennis cleared his throat a little, looking around at the agents still in the climbing gym, then squared his shoulders, putting his hands on his hips. He was wearing a red tie that looked nice with the mottled brown feathers of his crest, which were lifting a little; not exactly a *display*, as such, but definitely an indication of interest. “I’d like to offer this tribute,” he said, and held out an envelope, “BARTON” written in bold letters on the creamy paper.

Clint blinked, as the room rustled as people nudged each other and turned to watch. Spies were such gossips.

Well, what the hell. Clint was supposed to be taking more risks, after all; nothing ventured, nothing gained. And at least Dennis had put some thought into it. And Clint was pretty sure he didn’t usually wear a tie, so that was a nice gesture.

“Thank you,” Clint said, taking the envelope. He tried to ignore the whispers in the background as he opened it and pulled out the greeting card inside.

The front had a cartoony picture of a nest—not the kind of nests people slept in, but a bird’s nest, made of sticks and stuff—with a red heart in it, and said “In TRIBUTE to someone SPECIAL” in curly letters. A pretty standard tribute card, but at least it was nice quality, embossed heavy stock; probably brand-name and not a dollar-store knockoff or anything. Clint opened it. The inside had two figures of indistinct gender standing in front of the nest with a heart between them. The text said “Would you be SPECIAL to me?”

There were two gift cards tucked inside, ten bucks each; one to Starbucks and one to Bower, Bath, and Beyond. It was a nice effort, really; a formal approach, a little care in appearance, tribute gifts for nest and nourishment. Clint didn't really like Starbucks—Phil had spoiled him on locally roasted coffees—but he could use the card to get a Frappuccino or something. Nat and Phil both liked those. Plus, he had been thinking of getting a throw blanket for the living room to match his new cushions.

Clint tucked the card and its contents back into the envelope and met Dennis' eyes, cocking his head inquiringly. "Well?" he said, accepting the gift and allowing Dennis to make his request.

Dennis' crest lifted further and his wings flared a little. "Could I take you out to lunch tomorrow?"

Clint considered. It was kind of forward—you usually didn't go right to eating meals together on a first date—but lunch was more casual than dinner, so it wasn't really *inappropriate*. Plus, Phil had gotten called out to back up Nat on her mission, so his normal lunch buddies were both out of pocket. And, well, Clint *had* been thinking he should try to date more; maybe it had been a mistake to keep his social life so separate from SHIELD. It would certainly be easier to handle social logistics if the person you were dating had clearance to know where your office was and that you might suddenly have to stand them up to go break up a bioweapons cartel in Alberta, or whatever.

"Sure," Clint said at last. "Meet you in the lobby at quarter to noon?"

"It's a date," Dennis said, and looked around happily at the buzz of conversation that started up almost immediately.

"Cool, see you then," Clint said, nodding, and went to go change for his next meeting. As he was stowing his gear, he found a small paper shopping bag on the shelf in his locker, with "Clint" scrawled across the front in Phil's writing. Inside was a pound of coffee beans from the tiny little roaster near Phil's place that had the best-balanced medium-light roast Clint had ever tasted. It was too out of his way for Clint to go often, but Phil kept a stockpile in his office and let Clint help himself. He never let Clint pay him back, insisting that he bought it in bulk anyway. There was a post-it on the bag of beans that said "This should be enough to keep you going while we're gone—stay safe and see you soon! —Phil." Clint smiled, taking a deep, satisfying sniff of the bag—good coffee and a hint of toasty Phil-scent, like morning in a safehouse on a mission that had gone exactly right— before tucking it neatly back into the locker and going on his way, whistling happily to himself.

This whole self-actualization thing was going really well so far. He'd have to remember to tell Dr. Garner.

Psychosocial Dynamics in Modern Courting

Chapter Summary

> “Hot date, Barton?” Sitwell asked, giving him a wry look.
>
> Clint rolled his eyes. “Whatever, man, it’s just lunch,” he said. “No big deal.”
>
> Sitwell coughed. The cough sounded like “oatmeal raisin,” and the other agents twittered in amusement. Clint ignored them. This was supposed to be a planning meeting, not an analysis of Clint’s social life.

Chapter Notes

> I've been so very happy to see people being so welcoming to this story! Thank you from the bottom of my strange little romantic heart. <3 You are all the BEST.

Clint was standing in his kitchen in his underwear the next morning, halfway through his coffee, when he remembered that he had a date at lunch and might want to consider dressing up a little. Not a lot, mind—not for a first date—but a little bit.

Ugh.

He took the rest of his coffee into his nest and stared into his (new!) closet like the Fashion Fairy would jump out of it with outfit ideas. Not a suit, obviously—the only one he even owned pretty much only saw use for funerals, which struck the wrong tone—but probably not jeans or cargo pants or a tac suit, either, which disqualified about ninety percent of his usual work outfits. At least Clint had meetings all morning, so he’d moved his training to the afternoon. It would suck to have to do all this and then shower off and get ready *again* before lunch.

Finally, he found a pair of dark gray dress pants shoved into the back of the closet that he’d forgotten he had—he had a vague idea he’d accidentally worn them home after an op once and forgotten to give them back to Outfitting. He paired it with a blue button-down shirt and a few of the brightly-colored friendship bracelets that Natasha had made him last winter when she’d broken her ankle stopping a rogue ski instructor from assassinating the prime minister of Belgium. That would have to do; there was a little color, to show some effort, but it wasn’t too flashy. Clint didn’t want to give the impression that he was putting himself on

full display for Dennis; he hardly knew the guy, after all, and he didn't seem like he needed much encouragement anyhow. He'd already asked Clint to eat with him; Clint didn't want to come across as a sure thing.

It wasn't that he had a problem with dressing up for dates; sure, some people liked to talk big about how it was, like, *cheap* for an omega to display, but those people were complete jerks. As far as Clint was concerned, people should do what they wanted to do, and if you wanted to put on some ornamentation or flash a little under-wing to catch someone's eye, more power to you—but honestly, Clint didn't feel like putting himself to the trouble, especially since he had to wear whatever he chose to *work*.

He pondered his dress shoes for a minute, then decided his regular combat boots were fine. It wasn't like the boot part really showed, and Clint didn't want to carry extra shoes. He hated trying to get around in dress shoes; they had, like, zero grip. He couldn't understand how Phil managed so well—let alone Natasha, managing in heels on half their missions.

He gave himself a once-over in the mirror. His crest was sticking up again; he tried to smooth it down, but gave up pretty quickly. His crest just did that sometimes; after years of trying what seemed like every oil, wax, paste, gel, and mousse on the market, Clint had finally just accepted that he was perpetually kind of cresty, and that was just *him*. It caused issues, sometimes—people tended to think he was either flirting with them or trying to start fights—but by now he thought that everyone who knew him had figured out that it was just the way the feathers grew. Honestly, it was more of a problem that Clint's default resting face looked kind of murderous; there had been some misunderstandings, early on. But what the hell, Clint didn't choose his face or his feathers any more than his eye color, so why worry?

Shit, all the preening had him running late; what he had on would have to do. He grabbed his work bag and left, counting on his normal routine to settle him down from his odd mood before lunchtime.

He rolled into his first meeting a minute after the start time.

"Hot date, Barton?" Sitwell asked, giving him a wry look.

Clint rolled his eyes. "Whatever, man, it's just lunch," he said. "No big deal."

Sitwell coughed. The cough sounded like "oatmeal raisin," and the other agents twittered in amusement. Clint ignored them. This was supposed to be a planning meeting, not an analysis of Clint's social life.

"So," Clint said. "We got fresh intel on Neilssen's cell?"

"Ugh, fine," Sitwell said. "Have it your way, you killjoy." He shuffled through his papers. "Our analysts have identified a new pattern in the wiretap info…"

Clint's whole morning was like that; he went from meeting to meeting, and he kept running into people in the halls who commented on his outfit—which, did he usually look really scruffy or something? He was *not* dressed up enough to be that notable—or his lunch date.

News of Dennis' display had somehow apparently gotten all over the agency, and everyone seemed to have an opinion on it that they were dying to share.

Clint's last meeting before lunch was actually a check-in with the Director, and the Director's admin asked Clint about his date on his way in to the executive suite. Thankfully, Fury himself came out of his office before Clint could yell at poor Agent Adams, who had no way of knowing he was like the fifteenth person that morning to make a comment on the topic and performed a tidy and very welcome extraction.

"Thank you, sir," Clint said, after the door shut behind him. "I'm afraid I was about to be unprofessional."

Fury snorted. "You know, ostensibly I'm running an intelligence agency," he said. "You'd think they'd all be a little more subtle."

Clint threw himself into one of the visitor chairs with an exaggerated groan. "I don't understand it!" he said. "Seriously, why do they even care?"

"Eh." Fury shrugged. "You're an anomaly, Barton, and they're all trained to notice anomalies."

"An anomaly how? I mean, sure, with the shooting and all, but I'm nothing unusual, like, dating-wise."

Fury raised an eyebrow. "Says the pickiest omega in SHIELD."

Clint groaned. "Not you too, sir. It's bad enough Sitwell's got Natasha saying that."

"It's not untrue," Fury said. "There's nothing wrong with it, mind, but since you and Morse broke it off, you haven't accepted any public overtures at work."

"It didn't seem like that great an idea, considering how the last time turned out," Clint said. "Unfortunately, most of my life is classified, so it turns out civilians aren't that great an option either."

Fury nodded. "You're not wrong," he said. "But still, people notice patterns. You've got a high profile in the agency anyhow, so it gets folded into the mystique. People try their luck, they get shot down, the legend grows. And then out of the blue, you let Dennis ask you to lunch. Now, some of them are trying to figure out why you accepted his tribute and not theirs, some of them are trying to predict whether you'll have a grand romance, and some of them think you've had a secret mate all along, and are trying to figure out if it's Dennis, or if you broke up and Dennis is a rebound, or if you're cheating, or if Dennis is a cover." He sighed. "You *know* all this, Barton. For all you play it thick sometimes, you've got one of our highest scores in social engineering."

"I—huh." Clint blinked. "You know, I never really apply that stuff to my real life? It's just… for work, you know. For marks."

Fury shook his head, but he was smiling a little. “Honestly, that’s kind of refreshing,” he said. “Spies get kind of tedious, after a while.”

“I’ve noticed,” Clint said, sour. “Honestly, sir, I’m not trying to cause a stir. I just… didn’t feel ready, before, and then lately I’ve been thinking it might be worth seeing what’s out there, and Dennis was the first person who asked me who put even a little bit of effort in. Plus, Phil and Nat’re out of town right now, so I figured, might as well, right?”

“It’s your own business either way,” Fury said. “Though I’ll just say this; you’ve been choosy this long, so don’t be in a hurry. Make sure someone’s got what you need before you move ahead with them.”

Clint smiled at him. Ever since Fury had recruited him, he’d been a mentor just as much as a boss, and he’d always managed to steer Clint right. “No worries there, sir,” he said. “I’m just testing the currents right now; I’m in no rush to nest up again.”

“You’ll manage fine,” Fury said. “Now, if we’re quite through with middle school gossip hour, let’s talk about Barcelona.”

“*Please*, let’s,” Clint said. “I’m already tired of talking about this date and it hasn’t even happened yet.”

Clint went down to the lobby at 11:45. Fortunately, Dennis was already there when Clint got off the elevator; Clint was ready to get out of the building, and if he’d had to stand in the lobby in his date clothes while everyone was going out for lunch he might have blown the whole thing off and gone to hide out on the roof instead.

Dennis was wearing a different red tie today, which was nice, and he smiled widely when he saw Clint. He was a pretty handsome guy, Clint thought. Cute dimples.

“Hey, Dennis,” Clint said. “Ready to go?”

“No need to be so formal,” Dennis said, making an after-you gesture. “This isn’t a business lunch, after all; call me Keith.”

“Um, sure,” Clint said, stepping onto the sidewalk. “So what were you thinking for lunch?”

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s all taken care of,” Dennis said, hailing a cab. “You just let me handle everything.”

“Oooooooo….kay,” Clint said. *Geez*, this guy was pushy.

Eh, it was just lunch. How bad could one lunch be?

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"…so then we get to the restaurant, and he pulled my chair out, which was nice I guess? But then, get this, he *orders for me*." Clint rolled his eyes. "Like, what is this, 1953? And do you know what he orders?"

"I'm almost afraid to ask," Natasha said.

"No, actually, you guys should guess. Guess. What is he *so sure* that I'll want for lunch that he just goes on ahead and orders it for me?"

"Um… steak?" Phil furrowed his brow thoughtfully. "Pork chops?"

"Hah, see, no, that would make sense. No, he orders me a small grilled salmon salad. *With the dressing on the side.*"

Natasha blinked. "Please tell me that was the appetizer."

"Nope." Clint popped the "p" for emphasis. "I'm an omega, so apparently I have to worry about maintaining my figure."

Phil made a hilarious face. "But you're a *specialist,*" he said, making an incoherent gesture with his soup spoon that seemed to encompass all of Clint's… specialist-ness. "You should be eating more than four thousand calories a day! One of the most important parameters in our mission planning is *protein availability!*" He looked actually distressed, and Natasha looked disgusted on Clint's behalf; seriously, they were so great. He'd missed them.

"*You* know that," Clint said, pointing at him with a forkful of chopped steak, "and *I* know that, and the SHIELD trainers and nutritionists know that, but apparently, despite being a survival instructor, Dennis didn't get the memo."

Phil scowled. "We're going to have to audit his curriculum," he said sourly. "We can't have agents shorting themselves in the field."

"Eh, I don't remember him ever being this way in his courses," Clint said, feeling compelled to be fair even if he was still pretty annoyed by the whole thing. "I think it's like—his brain just clicked over into an entirely different mode once he was on social time? He doesn't have a bad rep with the trainees."

"Nonetheless," Phil said, taking a disgruntled bite of his sandwich. "Once the question has arisen, it's our duty to make sure."

Clint smiled at him. He loved how seriously Phil took the wellbeing of the agents he was responsible for—and even the ones he wasn't. It was hard to tell for sure—Phil's crest was pretty much the opposite of Clint's, and nearly always looked sleek—but Clint thought he was even ruffling up a little in indignation.

"Anyway," Clint continued, "I told the waiter never mind the salad and ordered an actual meal, so the rest of lunch was pretty awkward." Clint took another big bite of his steak. "I mean, I tried to give him the benefit of the doubt, but by the time he got around to sharing his views on 'these modern omegas who work outside the home'…"

“Are you sure this guy knows who you *are?*” Natasha said. “Like, maybe he thought he was asking out Chris Burton from Agent Services. You know, the guy who keeps trying to get SHIELD to do Great British Bake-Off as a morale-building activity.”

Clint laughed. “God, I don’t even know,” he said. “Turns out he’s really not that perceptive, anyway, because I was a hundred percent sure we’d both had a terrible time, and then he came around the next day and asked me to dinner without so much as a Tic-Tac for tribute. At *his bower*, no less, like he thought he’d sealed the deal and I was just gonna fall into his nest after one lunch! If I wanted to go lekking I’d *go* lekking, dammit. If a person asks me out I at least expect them to *pretend* they want something other than my body.” He ate the last of his steak, then started toying with his fork, flipping it back and forth between his fingers.

Phil scowled, dropping his spoon into his soup bowl with a little splash. “If Dennis was just looking for quick sex, he shouldn’t have offered you tribute like he was interested in some kind of a relationship,” he said. “It’s dishonest.”

Natasha curled her lip disdainfully. “Disingenuous at the absolute best,” she agreed. “A sense of entitlement like that is never attractive. I hope you disabused him of his mistaken ideas, Clint.”

“I told him I didn’t think we were looking for the same things in a relationship,” Clint said. “Can you believe he actually looked surprised? That guy’s so far up his own hole he’s practically inside-out.”

Phil’s face went tight for a moment, then he sighed, his shoulders sagging. “Well, I suppose it’s just as well he doesn’t work infiltration ops,” he said levelly, wiping up the soup splatter with his napkin. “I’d hate to be the one in charge of putting him through remedial training, otherwise.”

“Yes, Phil,” Natasha said. “We all know how much you hate getting the opportunity to disabuse someone of their sexist misconceptions.” She and Clint exchanged grins, remembering the Great Sensitivity Training Incident of 2007, which was still legend in certain corners of SHIELD. Phil tipped his head in acknowledgement, shrugging a little.

“Anyway,” Clint continued, ”apparently Dennis broke the ice, because for the last two weeks it’s been like I’m wearing a sign that says ‘try your luck.’ I’m buying you guys *so many* Frappuccinos, you have no idea.”

“They’re all giving you Starbucks?” Phil said, his brow creasing in puzzlement. “You hate Starbucks.”

“I dunno, I guess someone asked Dennis what tribute he used and now they’re all copying him.”

“Well, he *was* the first public approach you accepted in ages,” Natasha pointed out. “They must all be assuming he cracked the code.”

“Or they could just, you know, *ask me* what I like,” Clint said, dropping the fork back onto his empty plate with a clatter. “Or ask one of my friends. The whole point of tribute is to

show that you can provide for someone's needs, so wouldn't it just make sense to actually learn what their needs *are*, first?" He shook his head. "It's not just Dennis, either. I've really been trying! I had coffee with Agent Celso, and happy hour with Agent Martin, and I even did lunch with Lori a couple days ago."

"Rangemaster Lee?" Phil's wings rustled a little, and he sat up straighter, his face smoothing out into one of his "I have no interest in any events that may or may not be playing out in my field of vision" casual expressions, which was… weird. Did Phil have some kind of beef with Lori that Clint didn't know about? "You've always gotten along with her," Phil continued. "How, ah, how did that one go?"

"That one wasn't bad." Clint paused for a moment, wondering if he should ask, then figured that if it was his business Phil would let him know. He pushed his plate aside and moved on to his cookie. "We had a nice time talking, she's working on a proposal for an advanced range, I had some ideas. But I dunno, I didn't really feel like it was a romantic connection? I'd like to work with her some more, but that's not the same. You kind of want a spark, you know?"

Phil nodded, his overdone "nothing to see here" posture slipping away. "There are different kinds of chemistry."

"There certainly are," Natasha said, taking a sip of her tea and raising her eyebrows at them over the cup.

"I mean, not that I don't want to be friends with whoever I date, just…" Clint trailed off and took a big bite of cookie. He'd been running late that morning and had to rely on a protein shake for breakfast, and he was starving. While he was chewing, he heard a nervous throat-clearing off to one side, and froze. Maybe it was someone for Nat, he thought. Or somebody needed Phil for something. Someone always needed Phil for something.

"Excuse me, Agent Barton?"

Holding back a sigh, Clint swallowed his mouthful and turned. "Hi."

It was a junior agent this time, an alpha with a short, spiky yellow crest. He thought maybe she'd been assigned to shadow Delta on a training assignment a couple months ago? Agent W-something. Wilkins? She was wearing a red dress. Score one for pattern recognition, he guessed, but minus three for not noticing that Clint hadn't actually gone out with Dennis more than the once so it wasn't necessary to emulate his approach.

"I'd be honored if you would accept this tribute," she said, holding out—yup—a card.

For crying out loud, couldn't a guy get a minute with his flock one time without people coming out of the woodwork? He thought of taking the card, saying something nice, going out to coffee or lunch or whatever, making small talk, and suddenly the whole thing just made him tired.

He smiled at her, trying to keep his expression kind and not murder-y. "Hey, that's really nice of you," he said. "But my team just got back from a mission, and we need some catching-up

time, okay? I'm going to be pretty booked for a while. Maybe catch me in a couple weeks?"

Her crest drooped, but she maintained her poise; good for her. "I'll be sure to do that, sir," she said "I appreciate your consideration."

"Thanks," Clint said, because you could never tell when someone was gonna take rejection like a jerk and he appreciated when people didn't. "Have a good day." He made a sort of waving gesture with his cookie, then watched in horror as it broke off and fell on the floor.

"Aw," he said, looking at it sadly. "I was gonna eat that."

Phil nudged his dessert plate over. "Here, have mine." He had a fudge brownie, the good kind with the icing.

Clint paused, looking at Phil carefully. Phil had a secret sweet tooth, Clint didn't want to take his dessert away. "You sure?"

"I'm stuffed," Phil said. "Late breakfast." He nudged the plate over another inch.

"Okay then," Clint said, taking it. "Thanks."

Phil smiled, broad and genuine. "At least that's one minor disaster I can fix today."

"Aw, don't sell yourself short, Phil, I bet you've already prevented a war this morning." Clint took a bite of brownie and licked the extra frosting off the fork, and Phil watched him in apparent contentment, his eyes warm.

"So anyway, like I was saying," Clint said around brownie crumbs. "Am I wearing a sign or something? I'm starting to avoid the common areas. I mean, don't get me wrong, I like getting a formal approach. I want someone to do the thing proper, you know?" He made a swoopy gesture with his fork. "But geez, I'm starting to get tribute from people I've never even *met* before, and it just seems kind of… like, how do they even know they want to date me? How am I supposed to know if I want to date them? This isn't the middle ages, nobody's gonna arrange my mating. I need to at least have *some* idea if it's worth the time, but it's all just so much *work*. And to make matters worse, seems like the whole agency is up in my business about it." He took another bite of brownie. "Wow, this is really good, Phil. Thanks."

Phil ducked his head a little, smiling down at his plate. "You're welcome," he said. "I'm glad you like it." Honestly, if the rest of SHIELD could see what a sweetheart Phil was to his flock, they'd never believe it.

"Up in your business how?" Natasha asked. "What's going on?"

Clint rolled his eyes, exasperated. "God, ever since Dennis approached me, everyone has an opinion. Like, that junior just now? Watch, when I go to the gym later someone is gonna ask me about it. And if I'd said yes to whatever she wanted, people would be making comments about that the whole time, too. I feel like I'm on one of those reality dating shows and nobody told me." He sighed. "I dunno, maybe I *am* the pickiest omega in SHIELD."

“There’s nothing wrong with being selective,” Phil said fiercely. “And they should mind their own business about your private life.”

“Sadly, Phil, apparently most people in this place aren’t as respectful as you,” Clint said.

“I—I’m glad you feel that way,” Phil said, going a little pink. Man never was good at taking a compliment, despite being super deserving. Clint’d always found it endearing.

“Maybe stop accepting tribute from people you aren’t interested in,” Natasha said, “and concentrate on quality over quantity? I know they say dating is a numbers game, but it sounds like you aren’t really enjoying getting approached romantically by people you don’t know.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Clint said. “Maybe I should just let it cool down on its own, y’know?” He finished off the brownie and scraped up some stray frosting with the side of his fork. “I mean, people know I’m at least open to approach now, right? So if anyone wants to make a move, they can do the work to figure out what I really want. Plus, like I told that junior a minute ago, I wanna get in some quality flock time.”

“Good plan,” Natasha said. “Wouldn’t you agree, Phil?”

“I, ah, of course,” Phil said. “I think that’s a wise course. Of action, I mean.” He cleared his throat, and Clint nudged over the rest of his water.

“Cool.” Clint beamed at them. “Man, I am *so* glad you guys’re home. I really missed you. Dating’s all well and good, but there’s nothing like having my flock around me, you know?”

“We know,” Natasha said, running a hand affectionately over his crest.

“We feel the same way,” Phil said, smiling softly.

Seriously. Clint’s flock was the *best*.

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MONDAY

“Agent Barton?”

Clint glanced over from his treadmill, to see someone he didn’t recognize holding an envelope.

“*Dude,*” he said. “Seriously? I’m kinda busy here.”

“Oh, right, sorry,” the agent said. “I’ll wait.” He then proceeded to step up onto the treadmill next to Clint’s, sticking the envelope into the little rack where you were supposed to put your

water bottle or phone or whatever, and started running. Which…. *Seriously?* There were like five other empty ones. Clint opened his mouth a little and scented the guy—yup, whoo boy, alpha. Double-A and stinky with it, and like, wearing a pheromone booster on top. Clint wondered if maybe he was one of those guys who expected people to be bowled over with lust at his scent, because if so, he needed to work on his cologne choices. The smell was so strong Clint's *tongue* itched.

"So," the guy said, starting a warm-up jog. "Come here often?"

Was this guy even for real. "Yes," Clint said shortly, not making eye contact.

"Yeah, guess you would." Clint wasn't looking over, but he could see the guy giving him the once-over out of the corner of his eye. "I can tell you work out a lot."

Clint kept his voice flat. "That is literally part of my job, yes."

The guy laughed, like Clint was making a funny little joke. Clint turned his treadmill up so he'd have an excuse not to talk anymore.

"I just transferred in from the LA field office," the guy said. "Nice to see there are people here worth talking to."

Clint didn't reply, because he was running. He breathed deep and even, trying not to catch another whiff of the guy.

"How long have you been stationed here?"

Clint glanced down at the readout of his treadmill. He'd only done two miles, but it wouldn't kill him to short his cardio a little one time. He was eyeing the escape route to the locker rooms when he saw glorious rescue coming his way: Phil.

He slammed the emergency stop on his treadmill and ran right the hell off the edge and over to Phil, skidding a little and having to flare his wings a bit to stop before he ran right into him.

"Phil, hey!" he said, giving Phil a pleading look. "Just the guy I wanted to see. Spot me?"

"…sure," Phil said, raising an eyebrow but following his lead like the *absolute fucking legend* he was.

Clint went over to the squat rack, which was conveniently at the other end of the gym from the treadmills.

"What's up?" Phil asked. He looked poised for action, like he might need to grab a dumbbell and fight off a giant lizardman or something. Phil was so great.

"Guy on the treadmills can't take a hint," Clint said, walking little circles around the rack, trying to cool down.

Phil frowned. “That’s completely inappropriate,” he said, looking like he might not mind taking a dumbbell to somebody after all.

“Yeah, no kidding.” Clint sighed. “Sorry, but would you mind running interference so I can at least finish what I was doing?”

Phil squared his shoulders. “Of course,” he said. He reached into his gym bag, pulled out a fitness water, and handed it to Clint. “Here, drink something.”

Clint cracked the lid and took a long gulp. Purple flavor, his favorite.

“Thanks, Phil,” he said, feeling himself relax. “I can always count on you.”

TUESDAY

From: Barton, Clint

To: Coulson, Phil

Subject: FW: SHIELD Daily Announcement Digest

Admit it, Phil, this was you wasn’t it?

cfb

—FORWARDED MESSAGE—

Personnel are reminded that SHIELD fitness and training facilities are considered a part of the workplace, and that active-duty personnel engaging in physical training are performing official job duties. It is not an appropriate use of official work time to engage in personal or social activities, including, but not limited to, tribute offerings and courtship or territorial display. For questions regarding appropriate behavior in SHIELD facilities, please contact HRmailbox@shield.gov.

From: Coulson, Phil

To: Barton, Clint

Subject: re: FW: SHIELD Daily Announcement Digest

I can neither confirm nor deny.

-p

WEDNESDAY

Agent Hollings brought her dog Pickles to work and sent him over holding a little basket in his mouth with the tribute in it. Clint actually considered taking that one, but then he realized it wasn’t fair to date someone just because their dog was cute.

Clint spent a couple minutes petting Pickles and telling him he was a good boy, and when Hollings came to get him they chatted about dogs for a while before she picked up the basket.

“I had to try,” she said with a shrug.

“Honestly, I’m starting to feel a little hunted,” Clint confided, in a burst of dog-induced friendliness.

She looked at him, her feathers smoothing down after a few seconds. “Should I tell people to give you some space?”

“Please,” Clint said, gratefully.

THURSDAY

Clint opened his door.

“Singing telegram for Clit Borton!”

Clint closed his door.

FRIDAY

“I swear to god, I don’t know what is *wrong* with people,” Clint said. “I haven’t said yes to anyone all week but it doesn’t stop them. I think it’s *encouraging* them. This morning I opened a briefing packet and there were two theater tickets stapled to the inside cover!”

“What show?” Natasha looked up, interested.

“Um, something old. Lysol something?”

“*Lysistrata*?”

“Yeah, sounds right.”

“Well, that’s certainly passive-aggressive,” Natasha said, making an annoyed *tch* sound. “Who was it from?”

“I didn’t even look, I just said my packet had a copy error and got another one,” Clint said glumly. “I *swear* I’m not encouraging this.”

“I dunno, Barton, you have been looking pretty cresty lately, even for you,” Sitwell said. “Seems like every other time I see you lately you’re all ruffled up.”

“It’s true,” Natasha said.

“I’m not doing anything different than I always do,” Clint protested.

“It could be the humidity.” Natasha made a thinking face. “Maybe try not to smile at people as much?”

“Then they’ll just think I wanna fight,” Clint moaned. “You *know* about my resting face.”

“At least then maybe they won’t proposition you in the halls and you can make it to one of my meetings on time,” Sitwell said, tartly. “Which reminds me, we were here to talk about AIM.”

MONDAY

From: Fury

To: SHIELD-NYC-ALL

Subject: Unprofessional Behavior

I don’t care how you think someone is looking at you, we are all professionals here working toward the same mission and if I see or hear one more person picking a fight with a co-worker in any location but the sparring gym, I will deal with it myself.

Fury

Cotton Candy

Chapter Summary

Phil wanted to court him. Phil wanted to *court him*. How the fuck had Clint *missed* this?

Chapter Notes

So you see the E rating up there? Yup, this is the chapter where that starts becoming relevant. :-)

Many thanks as always to Kathar for phenomenal beta!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Clint spent the weekend working on his bower—and no, Natasha, he was not *sulking*, he just needed some alone time—and came into work on Monday by the back way. He and Phil and Nat were scheduled to be in a big mission planning session after lunch. Multi-hour meetings usually had Clint practically fidgeting out the window by the second agenda item; he wanted to hit the gym first thing to bleed off some energy. Still feeling a little wary of Treadmill Guy and his ilk, Clint chose the climbing gym instead of going to the main one. It was technically booked for a beginner free-climb class, but beginners wouldn't need the advanced walls Clint used, and the instructor, Sarah, never gave him shit about sneaking in as long as he did guest presentations for her special seminars every so often.

Clint changed quickly and made it out into the gym ten minutes before the class was scheduled to start. He began with a couple quick little warmup climbs up the intermediate wall, first using his wings to boost past the long handhold gaps and then making himself launch using body strength alone. Once he felt properly limber, he did a quick descent and then went over to the advanced wall, where the handholds were scant and large portions were overhang, forcing you to move with your whole bodyweight suspended from your grip.

It was challenging, even for Clint, and the burn of his muscles felt amazing. He loved how this kind of workout cleared his mind and relaxed him, how his focus narrowed so that he couldn't think about anything but the next handhold, his angles and approaches. By the time he finally made it to the wide ledge at the top of the wall, he was sweaty and nicely tired. He allowed himself to sprawl out on his belly for a nice rest, stretching out his wings and then fanning them out where the air conditioning could ruffle the feathers while he enjoyed feeling his body cool down.

He spent long enough in blissful silence that the class came in, flipping on the lights—he liked to work by the emergency lights only, it added a level of challenge—and chattering excitedly with one another. Clint watched idly while Sarah, her jade-green feathers gleaming, demonstrated a few climbing techniques and paired the students up to work on practicing wing-boosts. One pair ended up over by Clint's wall, chatting to one another while they worked. Clint let himself drift, content to be high up and unobserved and—for once—in no danger of having to fend off any tribute offers for a bit.

He was pondering the feasibility of getting a dog, considering his unpredictable travel schedule (Pickles had been really cute, okay; Hollings had put a little bow tie on his collar), when something in the conversation going on below him caught his attention.

"…don't know what Coulson's thinking," one of the students was saying.

"I mean, he's probably thinking what everyone else is thinking," the other said. "The guy's smoking hot, Coulson wants to lock that down, Coulson starts making courtship offers; where's the mystery?"

Clint blinked, then froze, straining his ears to hear more. Phil wanted to court a hot guy? Who? Phil hadn't *mentioned* wanting to court anyone. Clint tried not to have hurt feelings about it, but it was hard. Courtship offers, they'd said: not lekking, not offering tribute, *courtship*. As in, the way you offered someone full out, old-fashioned, romance-movie courting. *Phil!* Phil hadn't gone on more than two or three dates with the same person the whole time Clint had known him, and now he supposedly wanted to court somebody? Weren't you supposed to mention that sort of thing to your flock?

"The mystery is why he thinks he's going to get anywhere. I mean, sure, he's tight with the Director and all, and he's supposed to be good in the field, but nobody in their right mind would pass up a hottie like Keith for him. He'd probably try to audit your sexual performance."

Clint felt his crest bristling. How *dare* that complete cloaca say stuff like that about Phil? And imply that Phil wasn't hot? Phil was *totally* hot, that was just obvious, and as observant and considerate as he was, he was probably really good in the nest as well. And anyway, what kind of featherbrained fool would *not* want Phil to court them? You'd have to be both oblivious and stupid, and that didn't sound like the kind of person Phil would *want*. Phil liked to hang around people who challenged him; he said it kept his brain from getting dull from all the meetings Fury sent him to.

Maybe Phil was undercover or something? Or, like, the courtship thing was a ploy to unmask a double agent? Clint wasn't sure how that would work, exactly, but Phil could probably pull it off. And then the double agent would probably be so shattered by realizing that their evil had cost them a real chance at Phil's attention that they'd give up their evil associates and try to work for redemption to make Phil proud of them.

…or possibly the students were talking about some *other* Coulson who was friends with Director Fury? Clint didn't know of any, but that didn't mean there couldn't be one.

“Now you just sound jealous,” the other student said. “Not everyone is as shallow as you, Greg.”

“No, but seriously, Alicia,” Greg the Cloaca said. “He’s supposed to be this hotshot at espionage, running with Delta, but he hasn’t clued in that Hawkeye’s trying to let him down gently? He’s been so blatant I’m embarrassed for him—I mean, have you seen his *ties?*”

What was this guy even talking about? Phil’s ties were nice. Lately, he’d started wearing ones with more color, and he’d seemed really happy when Clint—wait.

Wait. Rewind.

Clint lay frozen on top of the wall, his heart pounding, trying to go back over what he’d heard. Did that guy really just say—

“Maybe Hawkeye likes a slow courtship,” said Alicia, who was rapidly becoming Clint’s new favorite. “I mean, nobody who offered tribute and then asked him out got more than one date, maybe he wants a guy who knows what he wants and isn’t afraid to spend some time working for it. Better than being a thirty-second wonder like some people.”

“That was a *lie*,” Greg the Cloaca said, and Clint didn’t catch the rest of whatever he was talking about, because his entire brain was like a giant blinking neon arrow pointing in one direction.

The hot guy that they thought Phil wanted to court was *Clint?* And they thought Clint wasn’t *interested*? Were they *high*? Anyone in their right mind would want to be courted by Phil! Phil was probably *awesome* at courting, like he probably would really get to know the person and give them thoughtful presents, and feed them stuff they loved, and display in really classy ways that…

Hang on, hang on. Wait. Phil *was* doing that stuff.

Phil had started doing that stuff *lately*.

Phil was… Phil was doing that stuff *for Clint?* Phil wanted to be… more than flock with Clint?

Clint’s mind whirled, re-examining moments and slotting them into categories: here, Phil had worn a tie the color of red wine and smiled bashfully when Clint had complimented him on it. Here, Phil was leaving the exact coffee Clint liked in his locker, to take home with him, instead of sharing the supply he kept at work. Here, Phil was watching Clint turn down a tribute and then nudging his brownie across the table toward him and looking so happy when he ate it. Here, Phil was following Clint’s lead without question in the gym, and then doing something to prevent Clint from being bothered there again; not condescension but backup. Here, Phil was listening while Clint talked about wanting tribute that showed that the person knew him, wanted to have a chance to get to know someone before deciding if he wanted to accept an offer…wanting to be *courted properly,* holy shit; he’d forgotten he’d even said that until just then.

(Clint had always wanted someone to court him, to be so sure they wanted to be his mate that they were willing to take the risk. Courtship was high-stakes, the romantic equivalent of betting the whole pot on one hand; to offer someone courtship was to ask for a chance to prove that you could be the right mate for them.

Clint had always wanted to be courted, but he'd never thought he would.)

Two years ago, on a mission that ended up with someone blowing up a cotton candy machine at a park, Clint had confided to Phil that cotton candy was one of his favorite flavors, reminding him of some of his few good childhood memories.

This morning, Clint had found a pack of gourmet bubble gum in his locker with a note that said "saw this and thought of you" in Phil's handwriting. It was cotton candy flavored.

Phil wanted to court him. Phil wanted to *court him*. How the fuck had Clint *missed* this? Now that he was looking, it was so obvious. Phil had always been kind, always considerate, had always shared food and affection with Nat and Clint both, but Phil really had been dialing it up lately. The ties, the food, the coffee—hell, even the cushions. The cushions Clint liked to put in his *nest*. They hadn't just been Phil being nice, they'd been *courtship overtures*.

And Clint had accepted them, but he hadn't accepted Phil's suit—he hadn't *known* to accept Phil's suit, because he hadn't realized Phil was a suitor.

Oh shit, the brownie. He'd turned down tribute from someone else and immediately taken food from Phil and eaten it, but then changed the subject, not leaving any room for Phil to ask him anything; it must have felt like such a tease. But instead of getting frustrated with him, Phil had just… kept offering, and looking happy when Clint accepted, and then *waiting for Clint* to signal that he was okay with Phil going farther.

Clint was *so okay* with that. All of that. And the more he thought about it, the more okay he was.

Clint pushed himself up and jumped off the wall, snapping his wings out and arching his body into a long glide; he took petty satisfaction from watching Cloaca Greg shriek and duck out of the way as Clint swooped over his head to land just outside the locker room door. Clint ignored the shocked chatter of the class in favor of hitting the showers.

He had some planning to do over lunch.

He cleaned up quickly and got dressed. He kinda wished he'd worn something nicer today, but maybe it was just as well he didn't have any options besides normal clothes; it would be too easy to get stuck in some kind of fashion feedback loop, be late to the meeting, and start the whole thing out on the wrong foot entirely. As it was, he was able to grab a sandwich and retire back to his office—well, technically, it was a desk in the specialists' bullpen, but he was the only one there at the time—to eat while planning his strategy.

(First he grabbed a trainee evaluation form and filled out a recommendation for Sarah to put Alicia into more advanced tradecraft classes and Greg into remedial situational awareness, because a), Greg should learn to make sure nobody's around to overhear before he discusses

sensitive information in the field, and b), how *dare* he talk like that about Phil? Phil was not the only person in this flock who knew how to use procedure to advantage.)

Clint spent an informative hour with a private browsing window and a selection of etiquette, advice, and relationship websites, including a brief diversion into Buzzfeed to take a "Which Jane Austen Hero Is Your Suitor Like?" quiz.

…And then to retake the quiz a couple times, because it kept trying to say Phil was a Bingley when he was obviously a Wentworth, or maybe a Darcy with less social anxiety. (Look, Nat liked costume dramas and Phil liked literature and Clint liked stories where nobody got shot and all the nice people were happy at the end; they had watched a lot of Austen movies in safehouses over the years.)

Anyway, there seemed to be a pretty broad consensus about the best ways to encourage a suitor (use his courting gifts in public, preferably where they could see, even more preferably where other potential suitors could see, and then make eye contact and smile). It wasn't that Clint didn't know that, just, he'd never been courted before, and he wanted to make sure he did it right. Phil was taking such care with him, being so patient; he deserved just as much care right back.

At least he hadn't fucked anything up by accidentally rejecting Phil's suit; that would have been a disaster. Fortunately, he'd basically been encouraging Phil by accident the whole time, just because Phil was so great and he knew Clint so well and Clint liked him so much. There wasn't any damage control required; Clint just needed to make it crystal clear this time that he was doing everything on purpose, that he'd figured out the question and was answering back with a glorious *yes*.

He wanted to do it soon—*today!* For all that it had been weeks already, Clint didn't want Phil to spend another night uncertain as to whether Clint wanted Phil to court him. Phil needed to know that Clint had seen, finally; that he'd noticed and he loved it, that Phil had done everything exactly right and Clint was ready to hear him. He needed the word to get around SHIELD as fast as the story about Dennis had, that Coulson had been making courting overtures and Hawkeye had accepted them. He wanted every single person who'd thought Phil was being shot down to know that Clint wanted Phil's suit, he *welcomed* Phil's suit; that he couldn't wait for Phil to offer it so that Clint could accept.

The cafeteria was the obvious choice—public and familiar—but Clint had already missed his shot at getting Phil to lunch today, and he didn't want to go at Sad Mealtime or wait for another day.

But… the planning meeting. Now *that* was an idea with potential. It wasn't public, exactly, but the op they were planning was high-profile, so Fury and AD Hill would both be attending, not to mention Sitwell and a bunch of analysts and support agents. The news would spread like wildfire from there.

It would be awesome; like the scene near the end of *Pride and Prejudice* where Bingley and Darcy come to call and Lizzy runs upstairs to put the ribbon Darcy had given her as tribute in her hair even though it doesn't match her dress, and walks into the room with her head high so everyone will see it.

Clint didn't have a ribbon, but he could make do with what he had.

His reminder chimed, and Clint gathered his stuff and headed to the conference room.

Phil was already there, along with several analysts, AD Hill, and Agent Corso, the analyst who'd done most of the background work for the op they were planning. Clint hesitated for a second before sitting at the short end of the table, around the corner from Phil; he wanted to be near Phil, but also wanted Phil to be able to see him easily. While the meeting attendees were trickling in, Clint flipped his notebook open and set out his things: the clicky pen Phil had given him that had both light and dark purple ink as well as black and blue, the file folder containing Clint's annotations of mission-relevant maps and blueprints, and the pack of cotton candy gum Phil'd left for him that morning, right on top. Clint saw the moment when Phil noticed, going still for a second before looking away, the ghost of a smile flickering over the corner of his mouth. Seeing it was startlingly good, sending a little thrill of pleasure through Clint, and he could feel his crest lifting in response. He quickly dropped his eyes to his notes, trying to calm himself. They were doing this thing slow and steady, after all.

Natasha came in last, a half-drunk Frappuccino in her hand (courtesy of one of Clint's tributes), and pulled up her chair.

"Good afternoon, everyone," Phil said, smiling around the table. Clint imagined it got a bit warmer when Phil looked at him. "Let's get started."

Clint waited until they were on their second discussion point and someone had asked for his opinion of the best places to station a backup sniper on the side of a high-rise. He picked up the pack of gum and started unwrapping it while he talked. He wasn't obnoxious about it, but he made sure everyone could see what he was doing. The paper rustled, and Clint's chest squeezed with sudden nerves; he'd never done anything like this before, not deliberately. He hoped that Phil wouldn't be annoyed that Clint was doing this during a meeting. He just… he didn't want to wait, didn't want Phil to have to wait. And he wanted to show that he was just as into the idea as Phil was, willing to give Phil the go-ahead in front of Phil's friends, in front of Fury.

He unwrapped the little pink cube of gum, the sweet cotton-candy scent like a burst of nostalgia. Schooling his face carefully, he finished what he was saying about the sniping positions and then turned his head a bit, looking right into Phil's eyes as he put the gum in his mouth, placing it on his tongue deliberately instead of just popping it in there like he usually would.

Phil's lips parted, just a little, and Clint could see his chest moving as he took a deep, slow breath; god, Phil was *scenting* him, right there in the conference room, and Clint felt a burst of satisfaction so deep that he could smell it on himself through the gum for a few seconds before he managed to calm down. Phil's eyes were wide, blown dark, a little flush on his cheekbones; he looked spectacular, and—Clint took a little scenting breath—through his usual scent-dampener, he smelled even better than he usually did, spicy and somehow toasty. He smelled like he was looking at the best thing he'd ever seen.

Natasha got to the bottom of her Frappuccino and slurped it loudly, and Clint ducked his head, face warm.

“Er, thank you, Agent Barton,” Corso said, turning to another page in her notes. “That’s very helpful.”

Sweet cotton-candy flavor coated his tongue as Clint tried to look around the room without being too obvious about it. Fury looked amused, Hill was studying the briefing packet with a nonchalance that was just a hair too smooth to be real, Natasha looked smug, and Sitwell looked like he was literally suffering with the desire to give him—or maybe Phil—shit. Most of the other agents either looked gleeful or confused, which honestly was kind of par for the course during Delta ops.

Clint somehow managed to pack away his nerves and excitement—Phil would make his next move, soon, and Clint was desperate to know what he would say—to refocus on the meeting. They actually made great progress, hashing out a solid operational plan, but that was honestly more a testament to everyone else present than to Clint’s ability to concentrate, which had largely deserted him.

He kept getting distracted by Phil. It was funny; Clint knew him so well, and yet everything about him seemed… more, somehow. If he closed his eyes, Clint could perfectly picture Phil’s face and his voice, the way he moved and the way he smelled; he knew them all with the same deep familiarity as he knew the layout of his own bower. But now, every time he looked at Phil across the conference table he noticed some new detail that made his stomach leap with excitement. How had he never realized how bright Phil’s eyes were, or how perfectly nibbleable the line of his jaw? Had Phil’s gestures always been so graceful? It was like a fog had cleared, or something. Like, some kind of hotness-hiding fog.

Anyway, the rest of the meeting went fine.

At the end of the meeting, Hill and Sitwell left directly, while Fury crossed behind Clint and Phil and gave them each a brief, heavy clap on the shoulder before heading to his next appointment. Everyone else cleared out pretty fast, too, which was considerate of them; Clint thought he might *literally die* if he didn’t get a chance to talk to Phil within the next, say, ninety seconds. Natasha paused on her way out to ruffle Clint’s crest and bend down to smack a kiss on Phil’s cheek. “Nice work,” she said, looking between them, then left with a saucy little flip of her scarlet wings.

Clint looked up at Phil, who had risen from the table but was standing back a little ways, watching him with an uncertain expression. Phil was wearing a light gray suit and a silvery-blue tie that brought out the color of his eyes; the whole thing looked amazing on him, contrasting with the inky darkness of his wings. Clint smiled, his scalp prickling as his crest lifted even more, wanting to posture and preen under Phil’s steady warm gaze.

“You look nice today,” Clint told him, gathering his own things into a pile. “Very handsome. I, ah. I like your tie.” He felt his face heat—it felt so weird to feel weird around Phil, to be talking with him like this instead of just bumping his shoulder companionably and saying “lookin’ sharp, Phil,”—but it felt good, too. Phil had been flock to Clint for years, and of course Clint knew that Phil loved him—loved him like flock, loved him like family. But for Phil to love him like a suitor? To desire him, not just in the nest, but in every part of his life? It made Clint feel… shiny, somehow, like he’d just been scrubbed and polished and renewed, like he was a priceless collectible someone had found in an attic, and Phil had looked through

the dust and the cobwebs and seen treasure. Clint was glad that they were doing things this way; it would be good to take some time to enjoy this while it was still new, to adjust gradually to this new, exciting level of relationship. Phil was going to court him, and it was going to be *awesome;* Clint didn't want to miss a single step.

"Thank you," Phil said softly, then smiled at Clint, sweet and open. "I was hoping you would." Phil's crest feathers were short and dense, so it was hard to tell, but Clint thought he ruffled a little as he spoke. It was amazing; honestly, right then everything felt amazing. He almost wanted to giggle like a fledgling.

Phil *like*-likes me, he thought with a grin.

"Thank you for the gum," Clint said. "It means a lot to me, that you remembered that."

"It means a lot to me that you told me about it," Phil said, his voice so soft and warm that Clint wanted to roll himself up in it like a blanket.

Clint smiled at him, and Phil's smile got bigger, and they might have just stayed there grinning at each other for who knows how long except for another agent walked in holding an armful of files and then visibly startled, her wings flaring out for a moment in surprise.

"Oh!" she said. "Agent Coulson! Agent Haw—er, Barton. I'm so sorry, I thought I reserved this room. There must be some mistake…" She had the tone of someone who knew very well there wasn't a mistake, but was used to getting bumped by senior agents.

"No, not at all, Agent Peterson," Phil said, his smile shrinking back into his normal Professionally Cordial expression. "I apologize, my meeting went a little over. We were just finishing up."

"We'll get out of your crest," Clint added, picking up his stuff and following Phil to the door. "Sorry!"

They passed several other junior agents as they left, and Clint noticed himself getting several appraising looks; he ran his free hand over his scalp, trying to convince his crest to lay down.

"It looks fine," Phil murmured, falling into step beside him.

Clint felt all his hard work being undone as his feathers perked right back up again. He sighed, though he couldn't even pretend to be mad about it; happiness and excitement were still zipping through him, and he felt fizzy and bouncy with anticipation. This was gonna be *so good*, he just knew it.

"I feel like maybe we had something else to talk about," he murmured, his grin breaking out again as he let himself tack a half-step closer to Phil, close enough that the edges of their wings brushed, making Clint shiver.

"Of course we do," Phil said. His eyes were sparkling with humor, a wicked little grin flirting with the corners of his mouth. "In the morning."

Clint groaned a little, theatrically, but after all, he'd kept Phil waiting for weeks before he picked up his cue; one more night was nothing if not fair.

Plus, well. It would be something fun to look forward to.

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That night, when Clint got home, he looked around his bower with new eyes. Phil's cushions had pride of place on the sofa, but Clint had also gotten a throw blanket that matched the bright, clear blue in their design and a pair of smaller velvet cushions that matched the jewel-toned purple. The coffee mug drying on the rack was a gift from Phil too, hand-thrown pottery glazed in a galaxy of blue and purple and pink; Phil had left it in Clint's locker with another pound of coffee beans. The row of postcards Clint had strung from a wire in the entryway were souvenirs of missions, each one picked up by Clint or Phil or Nat, a colorful spread of memories that had begun when, during the debrief of their first op together, Phil had handed Clint a postcard that said "Visit Boca Raton!" in cheerful orange letters on the front. On the back, in neat print, he'd written "Great job!" and signed it with an initial P.

It'd been a joke, then—a reference to a wisecrack Clint had made while they'd been in Florida posing as tourists—but Clint had been unexpectedly touched by the gesture. He hadn't said anything, but it had become a Thing for them—picking up the brightest, tackiest postcards they could on missions and swapping them with each other, and then with Nat when she came along.

Even then, Phil had been paying attention, and Clint's wings fluttered involuntarily as he let himself wonder what other benefits he would eventually get from that focus. Now that he knew Clint wanted to move forward, what would he do next? How was he planning on presenting his suit in the morning? What would he want to do on dates? How long before Phil would want to cook for him, to eat with him in private? Before Phil would invite Clint into his nest?

Arousal licked at his spine, and Clint instinctively started to push the thought away, then stopped, struck. How long had he been thinking of Phil like that and forcing himself to ignore it? Long enough, apparently, that it had become a well-worn habit. Huh.

Well, that was another reason Phil was a genius; the courtship period would give them both some time to adjust, to unlearn the habit of not looking, not scenting, not wanting. It wasn't inappropriate for Clint to think of Phil that way, not anymore. Phil wanted him to, Phil had *invited* him to. Phil had dressed to look handsome for him, had chosen courting gifts for him; Phil had declared himself.

Clint had seen Phil in just about every stage of dress and undress over the years; it came with the job, after all, and you never knew when you'd have to go undercover or dive into a fountain or decontaminate yourself from mysterious ooze exposure. It was all for work,

though, so Clint had always kept those memories filed away in the Work Zone. Now, though. Now, everything was fair game.

Clint locked up for the night and nested down early.

He felt a little silly—looking forward to masturbation like he was a half-fledged chick having his first cycle—but it was thrilling too, like he was about to do something special; like he was about to open a present after looking at the wrapping for a week.

Well, hopefully the *actual* unwrapping would be along in due time. But still.

Clint's new nest was big enough for two or three people to cuddle in, or for Clint to get a good wing-stretch without jamming any feathers. He'd picked it out hoping that he'd find someone to share it with, and Phil had sat in this very room and helped Clint put it together. There hadn't been anything erotic about it at the time—they'd been tired and dirty and surrounded by half-unpacked boxes—but now, the memory filled Clint with heat. He got naked and spread a big towel out on top of his sheets, to save cleanup later.

Clint propped himself up on a giant stack of pillows, half-reclined with his legs apart and his wings splayed out behind him extravagantly. It was kind of porny, but he liked how exposed he felt. Like if someone—if Phil—were there, he'd be able to see and touch anything he wanted.

Clint just lay there for a little while, feeling the air move over his bare skin and letting the anticipation build, remembering the way Phil had smiled at him earlier, the mouth-watering way he'd smelled, so *happy* to see Clint enjoying his gift. A lot of people liked that sort of thing, but they didn't usually smell so sweet with it, so unselfishly glad to have chosen well.

Clint thought Phil probably brought that same attitude into the nest; at least, all the people Clint was aware of that Phil had hooked up with in the past had seemed very well pleased with the experience, from the amount of flirtatious display and wistful scent they usually put off afterward. (Seriously, going to conferences with Phil was an *experience*.)

Clint let his eyes close and imagined Phil naked, building the image from assorted memories of gym and safehouse. The broad chest, fine-downed and solid; the rich iridescent black of his wings, flashing blue-violet where the light hit; the dense plushness of his short crest. Clint had only touched Phil's head to bandage scalp lacerations, but he knew how the feathers felt, so soft and thick they could almost be fur.

Clint trailed a hand down his own chest to his groin, letting his fingers pet lightly over his pubic down. He was getting really sensitive, his body starting to open and slicken. He rubbed a little harder along the edges of his slit, feeling the shape of his cock slowly swelling underneath. He was double-suppressed—it was SOP for active duty agents who weren't trying to conceive—so his arousal was a slow, steady build, heat and sensitivity seeming to bloom all over his skin as he slipped his finger inside. He wondered if Phil liked to lick slit, if he'd be willing to delve into Clint's body with his tongue.

His cock pulsed at the thought, brushing his finger, and Clint whimpered and clenched at the feeling, so sensitive but so good. The contact tipped him over into another level of arousal,

and he sucked in a breath as his cockhead slipped out of his body into the cooler air. He reached back to trace his hole with a fingertip; it was hot and slick, open enough already for him to get his finger in. He'd want more soon, want to be fuller, but even just this much felt amazing. He wondered if Phil liked that, too. Some double-As were weird about getting fucked, but Clint had a feeling Phil wasn't one of them.

He closed his eyes and imagined Phil on his belly in Clint's nest, sprawled over a pile of pillows with his legs splayed wide and his wings trembling. Clint would lube his fingers up and ease inside, slow and gentle and teasing.

Clint hiked his own legs further apart, pushing back into his hand. He was being much softer with himself than he would usually be, imagining that the snug rippling heat around him belonged to Phil, who wouldn't open as easy as Clint did, whose body would need coaxing and time.

Clint would love to take his time with Phil.

He drew back and circled his rim; his own body was near dripping now, but Phil's wouldn't be; Clint would put more lube on his fingers before he came back with two. He clenched his hole, pretending it was a tighter fit, a firmer push to get two fingers inside. He'd make it so good for Phil, stroke and tease him inside until Phil felt too good to stay still, until he had to moan or pant, hump the pillows or push back into Clint's hands. Clint couldn't wait to see it, to *cause* it. He couldn't wait to see how much Phil would relax in the nest, how much he'd let Clint see, how much he'd give.

Suddenly, Clint's fantasy flipped, and it was Phil's fingers pushing into *his* hole that he was imagining. Clint jammed two more fingers inside himself, back arching and wings fluttering against the cushions at the glorious pressure of it. He would open so fast for Phil, so wide; just *thinking* about Phil while he did this had him practically gaping with need.

Clint's body was taut with desire; he wanted to come, to come and come as much as he could. He pulled his slick hand out of his hole, biting back a whine of disappointment at how empty he felt, and grabbed his favorite plug off the shelf. It slipped inside with barely a stretch, just a beautiful pressure on all the best spots inside him, and Clint wrapped his fingers around his cock.

He was aroused enough that it didn't take long to bring himself trembling to the brink of his first orgasm. Clint tensed, spreading his legs even wider to feel the stretch in his inner thighs, and traced his fingers light and slow around the most sensitive parts of his cock. His fingers skated over the hot skin with barely any friction, coiling his arousal tighter and tighter, making him want to speed up and tip himself over. When he couldn't wait any longer, he gave himself a tight, twisting stroke that felt so good he yelled, arching up on his shoulders and feet for a moment as he bucked up into his hand, his come spurting out over his knuckles and dripping all over him.

He dropped back down onto the pillows, his chest heaving, and wiped his sticky hand on his thigh before reaching back and grabbing the end of the plug. His hole was still twitching with aftershocks, the rim sensitized. He rocked the plug inside himself, rolling it around to stimulate his rim and walls, and shuddered at how good it felt. Slick gushed out when he

pulled out the plug; he was so turned on he was leaking, the scent of his pheromones heavy in the air and making his cock twitch where it was still, hard and slick against Clint's belly.

He pulled a fat dildo off his shelf and pushed it into himself, angling it so it would rub against the best spots with each thrust. He wanted to fuck Phil, yeah, and also for Phil to fuck him, to use all his strength and control to make Clint crazy with it, aching for it. He wanted Phil to give him both barrels, to fuck him and come and fuck him and come without stopping, until all Clint could do was lie there and shake with it.

The orgasm came on without warning, just one good thrust in just the right place and it hit like a shock. He kept fucking himself, slowing his pace but using more force, drawing the climax out as long as he could. When he finally drew the toy out of his twitching, over-sensitive hole, his cock was still hard, his last orgasm coiling up inside him just waiting to be coaxed free. He dragged gentle fingers through the trail of slick leaking out of him, scooping up as much as he could and smearing it over his cock.

He thought of Phil doing that, playing with Clint's fucked-out hole until his hand was coated before pulling a last luxurious climax out of him with long strokes, just the way Clint liked it. Or maybe he'd let Clint rub off on him, or maybe he'd ride Clint, or maybe he'd suck Clint's cock. Maybe he'd hold it in his mouth as it softened and shrunk, both Clint's loads blown; maybe he'd press his lips to Clint's body, kiss Clint's slit once his cock was back inside—

Clint came again, explosive and amazing.

When he'd regained feeling his toes, he was covered with his own fluids, mouth dry from trying to scent an imaginary partner, and tender and sweetly aching from slit to hole, but his entire body was singing with bliss. He swiped the worst of the mess off with one towel, wrapped another one around his hips for overflow—his hole was still trickling a little—and tossed the soiled linens over the side of the nest. He'd deal with all that, not to mention the way he smelled like a two-week heat, in the morning.

He flopped over onto one of his favorite pillow piles, pulled a blanket over his legs, spread his wings out over his back and arms, and fell asleep almost instantly, wondering whether Phil would be a cuddler.

He thought the answer was probably yes.

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Clint rolled in to work the next day nearly half an hour early, feeling anticipatory and well-rested and cheerful; Nat took one look at him, rolled her eyes, and smoothed her hand over his crest, which was admittedly quite perky that morning.

"You two are going to be unbearable through this whole process, aren't you," she said, but she was smiling at him, indulgent and fond.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Clint said, settling his wings with an air of dignity that he immediately abandoned when Phil walked into the bullpen.

“Hi, Phil,” he said, feeling his cheeks heat and his crest lift. “You, ah. You look…” he cleared his throat. Phil was wearing his dark blue suit and a plum-colored tie with a subtle woven chevron pattern, and a pocket square that—Clint looked closer—yes, it was the one that Clint had given him for Christmas, the second year they’d been partners. He looked sleek and classy and handsome like a movie star; Clint wanted to step into his space and push his hands under Phil’s jacket and rumple him up and do unspeakably unprofessional things to his body.

“….good,” he finished, a little breathless.

Phil smiled, his stance widening a little, letting his broad shoulders spread. “Thank you,” he said. “So do you.” His eyes flicked over Clint, bright and sharp and eager. “I’d heard you got in early today, so I brought you a coffee.”

There were a handful of people in the bullpen besides Clint and his flock, and none of them stopped typing or reading or whatever they’d been doing, but there was a certain change in the quality of the background of the room that Clint knew was the sound of someone purposefully trying to act natural while also eavesdropping.

(Look, it was an occupational hazard, okay.)

Clint looked at Phil’s face, familiar and yet new to Clint’s now-opened eyes; Phil looked excited and a little nervous, still.

“Thank you,” Clint said, pitching his voice to be heard without being obvious about it. There was nothing going on here Clint was ashamed for anyone to see. He held out his hand, letting his wings shift a little with the motion, the feathers rustle. Not a blatant come-on, but a subtle little flirt, something to make Phil think about touching Clint’s wings, preening his feathers—and maybe even more intimate things, things like Clint had imagined the night before.

Phil took a half-step forward and gave him the coffee. Their fingers brushed a little as Clint took the cup, and the sensation prickled over his arms and down his back. The cup was warm and comforting in his hand, fragrant; he held eye contact with Phil while he took a sip, then let his eyes close as he relished it. His favorite, perfectly made and perfectly doctored to his taste.

“Delicious,” he said, opening his eyes again.

Phil’s lips were parted; he was scenting, and the knowledge sent a shiver of delight down Clint’s spine. “Good, I’m glad.” He drew a deeper breath, then flared his wings a little, just enough that Clint caught a gleam of under-wing plumage showing. “Clint,” he said, and his voice was different, almost thrumming with emotion. “May I ask you something?”

Clint felt like every feather on his body must be standing straight up, like the air was full of a electricity; he had to take a swallow of coffee, and then another, before he trusted his voice. “Of course, Phil,” he said.

Phil's scent got richer, spicier and sweeter, and Clint realized with a jolt that he wasn't having to reach past chemical dampers to smell it; Phil wasn't wearing the pheromone blocker today.

"It would be a great honor and a treasured privilege if you would allow me to offer you my courtship suit," Phil said, and the room went absolutely silent.

"That would make me really, really happy," Clint said simply. "I mean, I accept your suit, Phil. Yes. Yes, *please,*" he added, and someone in the corner made a choked noise, like they'd started to laugh and stifled it into some sort of half-cough, half-snort thing.

Phil smiled, wider and brighter than Clint had ever seen him smile at work before. "Thank you," he said. "So much." Clint waited for more, but Phil seemed content to just stand there and watch Clint drink his coffee, joy and pleasure and smug satisfaction in the quirk of his eyebrows and the curve of his lips.

The other specialists in the bullpen had started typing again, but the keystrokes were so regular that Clint would wager there was nothing but gibberish on their screens; he amused himself for a moment, picturing AARs suddenly taken over. "After rendezvous with the contact, I proceeded to sodnasdilhaskdjnfasdyr ehuofsdkjan ;lkfh dfalsdk qiwr sdflkdf;alksjd fasdasd." He wondered how long it would take before the first texts and IMs started flying: *holy shit, Coulson and Hawkeye are courting!*

He grinned at Phil—his suitor, for real and official, Phil who was *courting him*—and didn't bother trying to keep a lid on the fizzy feeling that was singing through him. "Walk me to my first meeting?"

"It would be my pleasure," Phil said.

Clint toasted the room with his coffee cup, and he and Phil walked out side by side.

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The month that followed was like nothing else Clint had ever experienced. Phil didn't bring courting gifts every day, but each one he did bring was somehow perfect for the moment; a hot breakfast sandwich on a day they had a super-early briefing, a keychain made from a smooth chunk of amethyst with an embedded tracker in case he lost his keys, a big blue and purple ceramic bowl, a coffee-table book on circus art… and yes, the odd gift card or two, but to places Clint actually shopped. Clint loved all of it, and used all of it, as much as possible where Phil could see him. For the things that didn't make sense to use at work, he made sure to text Phil pictures of it in pride of place in Clint's bower. A week in, Phil had turned up in the bullpen again in a gorgeous suit with an exquisitely packaged box of fancy candies, and had asked Clint to go with him for a walk in the park.

God, maybe he really *was* an Austen character.

They went for a walk in the park, and it was glorious, because they had everything they always had together—the friendship, the flock-bond, the shared stories and jokes, the trust and ease and comfort—but they also had more, the new awareness in the air between them, their pheromones practically shimmering like heat-haze in the corner of Clint's eye. It was so unexpectedly, amazingly *good* to have Phil all to himself, to have all of Phil's considerable attention and focus bent to something as simple as making Clint happy. By the time they parted, Clint was puffed up and cresty and his face hurt from smiling, and he and Phil both smelled pleased and excited and a little horny and a little smug; it was like rolling up inside a tea shop that was next to a bakery, all spicy-creamy-sweet.

Phil somehow managed to ask Clint out on a series of dates that would have suited, like, a royal courtship or a period drama. He never pushed too hard, always waiting for his overtures to be accepted before making a move, but still demonstrating in every possible way that he was dedicated to the courtship—to Clint. Phil didn't even suggest eating together alone until the second week, though thankfully he hadn't pulled back from their flock lunches with Natasha. It was funny—Clint and Phil had eaten alone together lots of times before, even recently, but it had taken on new connotations, now, giving Clint a shivery little thrill of excitement when he thought about it.

They still talked just as much as they always had, enjoyed the comfort of their close friendship, but now they also went to oddball little museums and galleries, to festivals and street fairs, to parks; now, there was a new awareness between them, bright and sharp and lovely. Clint accepted an invitation for coffee, one for ice cream, one to a food truck gathering, and finally, a month after his epiphany, to lunch.

They went on the weekend, so Clint didn't have to worry about work gossip (which had been going at a fever pitch since about the third of Phil's classy little displays). He changed his clothes six times before calling Natasha in despair, standing in front of his closet in his underwear and two different socks.

"He sent me the name of the place and I looked it up online and it says the dress code is 'smart casual.' What does that even *mean*?"

"You know what it means, Clint," she said. "I've seen your date outfits, they're fine. Just wear the same kind of thing you always wear."

"But this isn't—I mean, I want this to be *special*," Clint said. "Like, I want him to take one look and be like, wow, my date is the hottest omega in here, I'm so glad I went to all this trouble."

"Isn't that always the date-outfit goal?"

"I mean, I guess a little," Clint said. "But this time I really mean it."

"He *already* thinks you're the hottest omega in any given room, Clint," she said. "Just wear something you feel good in. You have to know that Phil's a sure thing for you at this point. Nobody spends a month courting if they aren't serious; that's way too much effort, and too high a chance to be humiliated if you do all that and still get rejected in the end."

Clint knew that Phil was serious—everything Phil had done for the last six weeks or so made it completely obvious—but he still felt himself grinning to hear Nat say it. “I’m serious about him, too,” he said. “I want him to, to enjoy this whole courting thing as much as I am, you know? Enjoy the journey. Like, it feels weird for me to say this, but I think we’re gonna be good together, and it’s kind of nice to just… have something to look forward to.”

“Well, maybe don’t prolong the anticipation *too* much,” Natasha said, practically. “We’ve got that op in Nova Scotia coming up, and I for one would rather you two get your pheromones settled down a little before I have to share a bower with you for an extended period of time. But otherwise, I hope the both of you have a great time together; you deserve it.”

“Aw, thanks,” Clint said, wishing she was there in person so he could hug her. “And you know, right, just because me and Phil are courting now that doesn’t mean you aren’t still flock. I know I can get a little carried away sometimes when I, um, when I’m doing something new, but you gotta let me know if I’m being a bad friend, okay, cause I don’t want to do that to you.”

“I know, Clint,” she said, and her tone was warm. “You’re both flock to me, too. I promise not to let you neglect me. Now go put on those gray linen pants you wore to Agent Flores’ retirement party and that turquoise shirt you stole from Outfitting because Phil said it brought out your eyes, get ornamented up, and have fun on your date.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Clint said, and blew her a kiss with an exaggerated sound. She laughed.

“Get dressed, Clint,” she said, and hung up.

Clint wore the outfit she’d said to wear, then pulled out his jewelry box and added Nat’s friendship bracelets, a couple of chunky silver rings, and his favorite earrings. He found an iridescent blue-green eye pencil in the corner of his makeup drawer, and lined his eyes, just enough to make the color pop.

Judging from the number of times Clint caught Phil sneaking admiring and/or lustful looks at him on the way to the restaurant, Nat’s fashion strategies were as sound as ever.

Not that this would surprise anyone.

Phil had found a restaurant that did fancied-up takes on fair food, and it was perfect, some of the things Clint’d liked best from when he was a chick, but made better. Phil was so good at making things better for Clint.

Clint hoped he did the same for Phil.

He knew that, judging by common standards, he wasn’t that much of a catch, at least not for long-term. He had a dangerous job that demanded short-notice extended travel and way more on-call time than most people would put up with, he’d grown up in the circus and been socialized really strangely, he’d had a spotty and inconsistent education, his boundaries were in unusual places… he was hot, sure, and at least SHIELD agents would understand about the job, but after things had fallen apart with Bobbi he’d wondered if maybe he just wasn’t meant to have a mate. If maybe he was the type of omega you wanted to bang, but not to keep.

He'd never fully realized, before he and Phil started courting, how amazing it would feel to have a relationship with someone who didn't just tolerate your quirks but actively liked them.

The job would never be an issue between him and Phil—most of the time, they were on the same missions, and when they weren't they at least understood enough to know that things that weren't shared were secret for a reason. Phil never made Clint feel inferior or defensive about the gaps in his knowledge; he'd just explain about sleepaway camp or the Teapot Dome Scandal or whatever the hell it was, without making it a big deal, and then he'd go right on ahead with whatever the conversation had been, not changing the subject or just brushing Clint off with a "never mind, it wasn't important" like a lot of people would.

Phil never assumed that he and Clint agreed about something unless they had talked about it and agreed with words, out loud. He'd never gotten mad at Clint because "everyone knows" that you should do or not do something that Clint had screwed up. He'd always been that way, even when they were only work partners; when they'd become flock, and now that they were courting, he took even more care about it.

It was so gloriously freeing, not to always be wondering if he was secretly pissing Phil off somehow. But Phil… Phil had told him, not too long after they started courting, that he was so happy that Clint didn't mind that Phil wanted to "talk everything to death"; apparently some people found it overbearing or condescending.

Stupid people, in Clint's opinion, but hey. More Phil for Clint, then.

After lunch, they walked around the neighborhood for a while, hand in hand. The sun was bright and the breeze was cool, and Phil's fingers were warm and strong and gentle in his, and as they strolled around discussing *Star Wars*, Clint thought that his life was great and getting better all the time.

"This is fun," he blurted out, in the middle of debating what possible evolutionary advantage it could give a sarlacc to digest its prey over a thousand years. "I mean, *you're* fun. Being with you like this."

Phil smiled at him, brilliant and unstudied and a little shy. "Yeah? I'm really glad," he said. "I want you to enjoy it, that's kind of the whole point of the exercise."

Clint, feeling bold and effervescent and excited, darted in and kissed him, a quick, enthusiastic smooch right at the groove at the corner of his mouth where Phil's not-quite-a-dimple hid. Phil's skin was warm and smooth under his lips, and the contact sent a prickle of awareness all over Clint's body. "I enjoy *you*," he said, and watched delightedly as Phil went all pink and pleased looking.

"The feeling is entirely mutual," Phil said at last, squeezing Clint's hand as his eyes flicked from Clint's ruffled-up crest to his face to his mouth, like he couldn't decide where to look first.

Clint squeezed back, basking in the look on Phil's face, the open affection and regard that he could almost feel like sunbeams on his skin. Part of him wanted to make a quip about other ways they could enjoy each other, invite Phil back to his nest and make some of his

increasingly-fervent fantasies real, but… this was different than anything he'd ever done before. He'd never waited this long to go to the nest with someone; generally, even if he didn't just pick someone up lekking for a one-time thing, he wasn't one to draw it out for more than a few dates before exploring naked fun. But Phil was different from anyone else, so it only made sense that they would approach this differently.

Courtship was a risk, sure; there was no way to salve your pride if it didn't work out by telling yourself you were just in it for some short-term fun. By courting, you were telling everyone the full extent of your investment, what you were hoping for, dreaming of. There was no way to brush off the impact of a courtship that failed. But at the same time? Clint felt safer in this courtship with Phil than he had ever felt in a relationship before, exactly *because* it was such an unambiguous commitment. Clint fell in love easy; it didn't take much. Natasha always told him she didn't know how he survived for so long, going around with a heart three times bigger than his head. He'd spent a lot of time holding back, trying not to come on too strong or be too intense or too clingy for people who weren't sure if they really wanted him yet. It was like his heart had a switch where they only settings were "yes" and "no," but everyone else had seven different flavors of "maybe."

Phil's switch was on "yes," and he'd told Clint and anyone else who cared to listen, and so Clint was able to just… love him. To fall in love with him, though as soon as he knew what to look for, he'd realized that he'd already fallen about three-quarters of the way without noticing it. And it was *fun*. It felt so good, to be able to just revel in the feeling like he was rolling in a dust bath or something, soaking it in and covering himself with it, the happiness and the excitement and the anticipation and the joy.

He wanted Phil—he'd never wanted *anyone* with the depth and intensity that he wanted Phil—but the path they'd been walking together was so good that Clint didn't want to hurry ahead. He felt sometimes like Phil was giving him all the things that normal people got in a whole lifetime of young loves and first loves and lost loves before they settled down, like Phil was bundling all of that up and putting a bow on it and offering it to Clint as tribute.

Clint had discovered that he liked letting Phil take the lead, and he wanted to see where Phil was planning to take them.

He ran his thumb gently over the back of Phil's hand, making no effort to hide his feelings, letting them spill out all over in his face and feathers and pheromones, the very image of a man falling in love.

Phil stepped in, turning to face Clint, his wings mantling just a bit as though to hide Clint from prying eyes. He lifted his free hand to Clint's face—slowly, watching for any sign it wasn't welcome—and rested it on his cheek.

"May I?" Phil said, soft and a little husky, and Clint shivered with want, his wings kicking out a little and stirring up a flurry of air.

"Please," he said, and Phil leaned in for a kiss.

He was gentle—so gentle Clint almost ached with it—the only points of contact between them their lips and Phil's hand cupping his cheek. They lingered there together, kissing close-

mouthed and tender, until finally Clint couldn't take it any longer; he reached out with the hand Phil wasn't holding and rested it on Phil's side. He gave himself a moment to enjoy the heat of Phil's body through the fine cotton of his shirt, then tugged. Phil came easily, eagerly, letting Clint tuck him close against his chest and slip his hand daringly back until he could just feel the silky tickle of Phil's wing against his fingers. Phil moaned against his mouth, and Clint took advantage of the way his lips had parted to deepen the kiss, just for a few seconds, not enough to be uncouth but enough to make it clear how happy he was to kiss Phil, how much he wanted to do it again and again. He drew back at last with a tiny nibble to Phil's bottom lip, and just… looked at him for a moment.

Phil's eyes were wide and blown dark, his mouth shiny, lips and cheekbones flushed; this close, Clint could see the short, dense feathers of his crest ruffled up, could feel how quick his heart was beating. He looked and felt amazing, sexy and eager and full of light.

"Phil," he said, mostly just to feel it in his mouth.

"Clint." Phil's mouth quirked in a little smile, the tuck in the corner that wasn't quite a dimple peeking out and making Clint want to kiss him again.

"I just—you should know," Clint said, flexing his fingers to feel that teasing brush of feathers again. "Everything you've done—it's been so good. I really—it means so much to me. That you'd bother. And, and I hope you don't mind too much, being slow like this. I don't mean to jerk you around, I just—nobody ever, ah, I haven't done this before. And it." He swallowed hard, taking courage in the softness in Phil's face. "It makes me feel…" he trailed off, somehow still finding the words sticking in his throat.

"Special?" Phil suggested, softly. "Treasured?" His eyes flicked down for a moment, then back up again, his jaw firming a little in the way that Clint knew meant he was gathering his courage. "Loved?"

Clint let out a long, shaky breath, pulling Phil a little more firmly to him. He felt like his heart was going to hammer right out of his chest. "Yeah," he said. "All that."

"Good," Phil said. His eyes were shining, beautiful. "That's how I mean it."

"Yeah?" Clint wanted to laugh, happiness and exhilaration making his wings flutter, his face starting to hurt from how wide he was smiling. "Good. Because I do, too."

"Good," Phil echoed. His words were simple, but his face made up for it; he was looking at Clint like he was a vision, like he was seeing everything he'd ever wanted laid out at his feet, free for the taking. He looked so happy he was practically floating, and Clint's heart soared with pride and triumph and love: *he* did that. Phil looked like that because of *him*. Clint had literally saved the world from a nuclear war one time, and it hadn't felt this good.

They might have stood there for the rest of the afternoon, staring dopily into each other's eyes, if someone hadn't come up behind them and said "Excuse me."

They turned, and Clint ducked his head sheepishly when he saw a young man pushing a little pair of nestlings in a stroller, chubby and adorable with their downy heads and wings and big,

curious eyes.

“Sorry,” the man said. “I hate to interrupt, but…” he gestured at the narrow sidewalk, which Clint and Phil were taking up the entire width of while they stood there having feelings.

“No, we’re sorry,” Phil said.

“Yeah, we got… a little distracted.” Clint rubbed the back of his neck.

“No worries, buddy, I remember what that’s like. You guys take care.” He gave them a friendly wave and went on his way.

They looked at each other, then turned in unspoken accord to walk again, the moment not so much broken as come to its natural end.

It was all right. Clint was pretty sure they’d have plenty more moments to come.

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“Barton.”

Clint smiled, something in him relaxing to hear his brother’s familiar voice, high-pitched squeals in the background; the chicks were playing something, likely. “Hey, Barn.”

“Clint! Just a minute, let me go in the other room.” The noise died down, and Clint heard a door click shut. “I don’t usually hear from you during the week,” Barney said. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, it—it’s really good,” Clint said, flopping down on his side on his sofa and hugging one of Phil’s cushions. “How are you guys?”

“We’re awesome,” Barney said, sounding warm and excited. “You know, I was going to tell you this when we talked this weekend, but I can’t wait. Laura’s broody again!”

“Aw, that’s great! Congratulations!” Clint grinned. “When do you think she’ll have the clutch?”

“October, November,” Barney said. “Just in time for Christmas photos.”

“How are Coop and Lila taking it?”

Barney chuckled. “The chicks are over the moon, they’ve been pestering us for a little brother or sister ever since their best friend’s parents had another clutch last year. Hopefully the enthusiasm lasts long enough for them to help once the new ones get here.”

They chatted a bit longer, catching up on family news. Clint wanted to tell Barney about Phil—he was practically bursting with it—but it was hard to know how to begin, somehow. He hadn't mentioned the courtship when it began, feeling an almost superstitious desire to keep it private at first, like a wish that wouldn't come true if you told it.

"So enough about us," Barney said at last. "I want to hear what's taking your status from 'fine' or 'same old, same old' to 'really good.' Something exciting happening?"

"Yeah, there is," Clint said, grateful for the opening. "You know Phil? Coulson?"

"From your flock, yeah?"

"Yeah. He, ah, we've been. He's courting me," Clint said, and then the words seemed to tumble over each other as he spoke. "Barn, it's like—he's taking it really slow, doing things formally, like, he waits for me to accept each gesture before he makes another one. It's been like a month and he hasn't pushed at all, never even hinted that he was unhappy with the pace or anything. He just, he gives the most thoughtful gifts, stuff that shows he really gets me, and he thinks of such cool places to go. And we went to lunch last weekend and he." Clint paused, gulping a breath. "Barn, he says he loves me." He could hear his own voice, how stunned with joy he still sounded when he thought of it. "And I, I'm pretty sure he means it."

"He'd better," Barney said. "Why on earth wouldn't he? You guys've been flock for ages, you don't risk messing that up if you aren't serious about a person. And from everything you've said about him, he sounds like a good guy."

"He is," Clint said, in a voice that was decidedly not a swoon, though it kinda wanted to be. "He's just… he's solid, you know? You can depend on him. Like, for justice and stuff, sure, but also he's just… good. He's kind and he notices people and he goes out of his way to take care of people who need help, and… I mean, he's absolutely scorching hot, that just goes without saying, but that isn't even the best thing, the best thing is just… him."

"Wow," Barney said, after a moment, sounding a little stunned. "That—Clint. I'm so happy for you."

"Really?" Clint didn't mean for his tone to come out as wistful as it did. "I mean, I know you and Laura keep trying to get me to date someone who isn't in the business, but…"

"Clint, we just want you to be happy," Barney said. "With what happened with Bobbi, it sounded like maybe your jobs were getting in the way, that's all. But you've always talked about Phil so highly, and right now? I don't know if I've *ever* heard you sound this good, certainly not in the last five years. If he can make you feel like this, we'll welcome him to the family with open arms."

Clint felt his face heat even while a completely involuntary grin stretched his cheeks. "I mean, don't be in too much of a hurry," he said. "It's not like I'm sending out nesting announcements yet or nothing, we haven't even talked about that. I don't want to count my kits before the litter's born, you know?"

“I don’t think you’ve got too much to worry about,” Barney said, chuckling. “He’s courting you formally, he told you he loved you—that usually only ends one of two ways, and I don’t see you planning to throw him over. You watch, before too long you’re going to be calling me to gush over his mating display.”

“He might not do that,” Clint protested. Somehow, even after everything else Phil had given him, it felt like overreaching to imagine it; like he was being too bold, wanting too much. “I mean, some people don’t. And he’s a pretty reserved guy unless he’s in private with flock.”

“Some people don’t, but I bet he will,” Barney said. “Hell, I’m not exactly Mr. Sentiment myself, and I displayed like hell for Laura. Right in the middle of the church grounds after Sunday service in front of half the town. I thought I was gonna pass out, not gonna lie, but she deserved for everyone to know I was serious about treating her right.”

“I don’t think you’ve ever been anything *but* serious about treating people right, Barn,” Clint said, feeling a little misty as he remembered how hard Barney’d always tried to take care of him, even when he was hardly fledged himself.

“Yeah, well, you want him to display, don’t you?”

“I… not unless he wants to,” Clint said. It was true, he’d never want Phil to do something he hated for Clint’s sake, but… Clint wanted him to *want* to. He wanted to see what he’d wear, how he’d stand; he wanted to hear what Phil’s family’s Call sounded like; he wanted Phil to spread his wings wide and display, wanted to be able to spend as long as he wanted memorizing his plumage. He wanted everyone to see that Phil was choosing Clint, and then he wanted them all to watch in envy as Clint chose Phil right back.

Barney chuckled again, interrupting Clint’s reverie. “Like I said, I look forward to hearing about his display,” he said. “I bet he cooks the mate-meal himself, he seems like the type.”

“I don’t—I mean, probably,” Clint said. “I mean, he bakes and all, so.” He could feel his crest lifting at the mere thought, of Phil planning a menu, shopping, preparing food for Clint with his own hands, maybe asking Clint to his bower, maybe even feeding him a few tidbits—nothing tacky, just symbolic, the traditional gestures that you’d make to prove that you’d care for your mate while they were going broody, in the eternal weeks of pre-heat when all a person wanted to do was eat and be coddled.

(Clint had only experienced it once—healthcare was a bit spotty in the mercenary life and getting his suppression done on time wasn’t really a priority—but fortunately he’d had a good bolt-hole and a kind omega neighbor who didn’t mind leaving groceries outside Clint’s door. As soon as Clint’s heat had broken, he got himself to a clinic before he’d even gotten his appetite back and got the longest-lasting O implant they had.

It might be different, with a partner. Someone to massage the cramps and keep him fed as his body built a clutch. Someone to mate him when the heat came, as many times as he needed. Someone to guard him while he carried the eggs, belly swollen and body unwieldy. He didn’t want it soon, or maybe even at all—he loved his work, and so did Phil, and there really wasn’t any hurry—but he thought of Phil being that partner and something in him ached with want.)

“Earth to Clint,” Barney was saying, and Clint realized he’d been spaced out for… a while, really.

“Shit, sorry,” Clint said. “I ah. I was just…” daydreaming, he didn’t say, but Barney seemed to hear it anyway.

“Good,” he said. “Hey, Laura’s calling me for dinner, but you keep me in the loop, okay? And send a picture, Laura wants one of your flock anyway.”

“Okay,” Clint said. “Yeah, Barn, okay.”

“Love you, chick,” Barney said. “I’m glad to see things working out like this, okay? You deserve great things.” His voice was a little rough; Clint thought he was probably thinking of all the things they’d both had in their lives that weren’t exactly great.

“Love you too,” he said, sniffing a little. “Give Laura and the chicks hugs from me, tell them I’ll see them at Christmas, okay?”

“Sure,” Barney said. “Or, you know, at your mating party, whichever comes first.”

“Good*bye*, Barney.”

He laughed. “Mark my words!” Clint heard voices in the background. “Yeah, sorry, I’m coming. Bye, Clint.”

Clint hung up the phone, feeling warm and excited. He wasn’t expecting Phil to do a big display, or even necessarily to want to mate with him right away, though he knew it was what Phil wanted eventually. But… he couldn’t deny that Barney was right that Phil *might* do one. And he couldn’t deny that if he did, Clint would be… really, really happy.

Maybe Barney was right, and Clint deserved some good things. He knew for damn sure that Phil did. So if… maybe, if one of the things Phil wanted was Clint, in his life and his nest for keeps?

Maybe they’d both get what they wanted.

Chapter End Notes

As always, massive thanks to the Order of St. Wilfrid for being the best flock ever!

On Display

Chapter Summary

Phil walked into the cafeteria, and Clint forgot to breathe.

Chapter Notes

You know how for some stories, you get one scene in your head first, and everything you write is basically building up to it?

This is that scene for this fic. I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A week or so later, Clint was taking a well-deserved late lunch. It was Weapons Recertification Day, which was always fun; Clint enjoyed setting some records and watching certain jerks from STRIKE tying themselves in knots trying to justify why they couldn't come anywhere near them. Schadenfreude, maybe, but see above re: jerks: Clint figured they deserved a little deflating. He'd pinged the flock group text after he'd washed the cordite off his hands: *lunch??* Nat had written back, *meet you there but Phil's in meetings*, and Clint had sent a thumb's up emoji and then a couple random food emojis while he walked to the cafeteria.

Natasha got there just behind him, and they gossiped about the range scores while they ate, comparing notes on who was making the best showing that year—besides their flock, of course; they were very well aware of each others' skills.

They were nearly finished eating when something caught Clint's ear, a sound just unusual enough to register as something to pay attention to over the noise of the cafeteria on a crowded lunch shift. He cocked his head, trying to hone in on it, something high-pitched—whistling, but different somehow—and then the background noise started dying away and Clint heard it for real and realized that it wasn't a whistle, it was a *call,* a low, carrying *tic tic tic* followed by a single clear note that swooped from high to low. It cut through what background noise remained, practically demanding that everyone in earshot pay attention.

There weren't very many reasons why someone would call like that, in the middle of SHIELD, in the middle of the day; no emergency alarms were going off, so it pretty much had to mean that somebody was gearing up for a big display. Clint could hear excited whispers starting up around him as people speculated who it might be, and he fought down a rising, half-articulated hope that left him almost queasy with nerves.

The call got louder, and everyone turned toward the doors, expectant, and then the doors swung open on one last, ringing call and—

Phil walked into the cafeteria, and Clint forgot to breathe.

Wait, no, he wasn't walking—that wasn't anything so tame as a walk, that was, that was a stride, a *strut*—a roll and a swagger that Clint had never seen Phil use as himself, and only once or twice undercover, and that most people had never seen from him at all. People scattered out of his path, pulling chairs with them, making room; even Nat scooted her chair back and to the side a ways, and Clint was left facing Phil across the open space, crest helplessly lifting and hands starting to tremble.

Phil was wearing a suit Clint had never seen before; it was a deep, glossy jet black, gleaming blue where the light hit it, almost the same color as his wings. There was something different about the jacket, too, and Clint couldn't figure it out until he saw Phil brush his fingers over his own cuffs and noticed the tiny buttons there; god, Phil was wearing a *display suit*, like he was, was proposing to a duchess or getting sworn into Congress or getting an Oscar.

Was all that—*could* all that really be for *Clint?*

Phil stopped a few feet in front of Clint's table, not even seeming to notice the junior agents who hurriedly shoved furniture out of the way, jostling and hissing at each other to keep a good view; he looked bigger, taller and broader and more present than normal, and Clint felt pinned and naked under his intense, bright gaze. He couldn't have looked away if a bomb had gone off under his chair.

Phil inhaled deeply, his chest swelling, and called once more, the swooping note of it less decisive this time, more questioning: *will you hear my proposal?*

Clint sucked in his own, shaky breath, and called back, the slow warble low in his throat that said, *go ahead, I'm listening*.

Phil's face was set, intent—he looked like he was on a mission, and Clint had never fully realized—well, okay, maybe he'd realized but he'd never fully *processed*—how hot Phil's mission-face would be when you knew that his mission was *you*. Clint knew he was flushing, his mouth dropping open to catch Phil's scent better, spicy and tingling on his tongue.

Phil stamped his foot, the sound like a shot in the silent room, and began his dance.

Clint had seen a fair few mating dances in his time—most people still liked a public display for this sort of thing—and he always enjoyed them, because they were all so different. Phil's dance wasn't a kind he'd seen much before—it reminded him most of some of the Russian dances he'd seen, lots of percussive footwork and a very straight posture, almost martial. It was very *Phil*, somehow, precise and intricate; it got quicker as it went on, till Clint was almost dizzy. On the last step, Phil snapped his wings to full extension and threw his arms wide, throwing open the bright blue, glimmering silk lining of his jacket and exposing the startling electric blue plumage of his under-wings.

Clint could hear gasps around the room; Phil had never fully displayed at work before, not that he'd ever heard of, and he didn't even do the sort of partial posture displays a lot of senior agents did; he always kept himself sleeked back and tidy and contained, downplayed himself on purpose. Clint had naturally seen Phil with his wings out before—the sort of missions they ran, it was hard to avoid—but even his keen visual memory didn't do justice to that brilliant, almost neon blue.

Phil held the pose, the thick muscles of his shoulders and chest visibly tense with it, and called again; not the attention-grabbing call from before, this time, but a mating call, fluid and graceful and interrogative, a melody in want of a partner.

Clint was, he realized, still holding his fork in midair, two green beans dangling from it. He'd been so transfixed he'd completely forgotten everything non-Phil in the world.

He set it down carefully and stood, the scrape of his chair loud in the silent room. He came around the table and stood in front of Phil, meeting his eyes, his heart hammering. He licked his lips—they'd gone dry—and called back, the low, throbbing, almost raspy call that he'd always been a little shy to let people hear. It wasn't showy like a lot of people wanted, or even melodic like Phil's. For a moment, Clint felt embarrassed, that he'd met Phil's pageantry with his unimpressive call—but then Phil joined him, again, and it was different; Clint's call sounded entirely different, suddenly almost sweet, a grounding harmony to set off Phil's soaring melody.

They sounded *perfect* together.

When they finally stopped calling they were both breathing hard, the air between them thick and spicy-sweet with their pheromones.

"Clint," Phil said, his voice soft and a little rough. "I would be honored—and, and so glad—" he tripped a little at the word, and Clint swayed, overwhelmed at how much Phil was letting everyone see of his feelings—"if you would consider accepting me as your mate."

There was a rushing in Clint's ears, though he couldn't tell if it was frantic, gossipy whispers or just his own pulse. He took a step forward, close enough to Phil that he could feel the heat radiating off him, and reached up to cup Phil's cheek. Phil's face was open, so soft with feeling that Clint's wings flared out involuntarily; he wanted to mantle over Phil, shield that look away from anyone but him. He wanted to accept Phil in the most poetic and impressive way, to say something worthy of a movie, something that would make all the watching agents sigh.

What came out of his mouth was "oh *fuck* yes."

Phil laughed, sharp and ringing and delighted, lighting up with glee; and suddenly Clint's world filled with black and blue and Phil and *yes good more*, and it took him a good couple seconds to realize that Phil had pulled him into his arms and swept his wings forward around them and was kissing the hell out of him, mouth fervent and body tight and trembling, a line of heat and want that Clint was extremely interested in exploring further, just as soon as they weren't, well. In the SHIELD cafeteria during lunch rush on a Thursday.

Phil finally broke the kiss, panting a little, and skated his nose over Clint's cheekbone. "Can I cook for you tomorrow," he murmured into Clint's ear. "Can I feed you in my bower, will you come to me," and all Clint could do was shake and cling and whisper back, "please, yes, please."

When he thought back over it later, he never was quite sure how they managed to get out of the cafeteria without causing a riot. He strongly suspected Natasha had something to do with it, and also… someone else? Maybe Agent Hand, he thought he'd seen a flash of magenta. But regardless, somehow Phil got swept off somewhere and Natasha tucked Clint into a SHIELD car and took him home for the day. Which was really just as well; Clint was vibrating at a very high frequency, between the poles of elation and nervousness, with regular detours into sheer lust, and there was no possible way he would have done anything at work for the rest of the day except distract everyone, stink up the place with pheromones, and maybe doodle Phil's name with hearts around it on his meeting agendas.

"Nat, did you *see*," he babbled at her, collapsing onto his couch and grabbing Phil's cushion and hugging it to his chest like he could embrace Phil by proxy. "Fuck, that *suit*, and his *wings*, and, and did you see the way he looked at me?"

She giggled. "Clint, nearly half the onsite agents in New York saw the way he looked at you, and everyone else has already heard about it and is trying to find a way to see the security footage. There hasn't been this much buzz around the agency since Director Carter foiled an assassination plot at her own Medal of Freedom ceremony."

"Cause Phil's a fucking legend just like she was," Clint agreed. "He smelled *so good*, Nat."

"You were both certainly… potent," she said. "Reminded me of that time I had to subdue an assassin in the Yankee Candle factory." She pulled out her tablet, typed for a few seconds, then handed it across to Clint. "Speaking of, here, sign this."

He took the tablet and pressed his thumb to the reader then entered his PIN when the e-sig confirmation screen came up. "What is it?"

"Your leave request for tomorrow. Hit 'submit'."

" I don't need leave," Clint protested. "I'm not going over to Phil's until dinner."

"And you'll spend the intervening time staring into space, sighing, and radiating the pheromonal equivalent to a bullhorn declaring your undying love and intense horniness to anyone within twenty feet of you," she said, unimpressed. "I'm sure that will be very helpful to the cause of global security. Hit 'submit'."

He hit "submit." Less than thirty seconds later, the confirmation message dinged, and Clint looked at it in confusion.

"The Director extended the leave request until Monday," he said.

Natasha snorted. "Guess he's got some deep-seated trauma related to Yankee Candles," she said. "Good, that'll give you time to fuck yourselves out and get your heads on straight

before you come back to work."

"We aren't going to spend the *entire* weekend in bed," Clint protested.

"Sure," Natasha agreed. "You'll have to eat eventually."

Clint consider protesting further, but honestly, it wasn't like he didn't hope she was right. "I just… what am I gonna do all day tomorrow?" he said. "I'll drive myself out of my tree if I just sit around trying to, to pick an outfit or whatever. I'll show up to Phil's in, like, a clown costume. Or hot pants. Or a clown costume that includes hot pants. And then Phil will take it all back because he doesn't want to mate a hot pants clown man!" The scenario, which honestly he'd started as hyperbole, suddenly sounded horribly plausible, and he felt his eyes get big. He turned to Nat pleadingly. "Nat, please don't let me ruin this. What should I do, seriously? I never did a mate-meal before, not a formal thing, me and Bobbi just went out for pizza together for ours, I don't wanna fuck it up."

She muttered something impatient-sounding in Russian. "Because you are my flock and I love you, I am going to help you with this," she said.

"You're the *best*," Clint told her fervently.

"True," she said, then sighed, her face softening. "Go take a shower and get yourself settled a little, and then we'll plan," she said.

Clint nodded, and went to follow her directions, practically bouncing down the hall in his excitement. Nat wouldn't let him fuck it up. He was going to Phil's for a mate-meal, and then he was going to spend as long as possible making sure Phil knew that Clint would be absolutely devoted to making sure his future mate was extremely well satisfied.

This was going to be *amazing*.

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Following instructions, Clint slept in the next morning as long as he could, then got up and did a moderate workout after breakfast, not enough to make him sore (there'd be enough of that later, he sincerely hoped) but enough to settle his nerves and bleed off some of the energy that was zinging through him. He had a nice lunch—not too heavy, plenty of protein—and then went to meet Natasha at the address she had texted him, which turned out to be some kind of repurposed warehouse with "Lissage: Preen. Pamper. Perfect." written in gold script across the window.

"Is this a spa?" he asked her, peering suspiciously through the glass past an arrangement of bonsai trees and silk scarves. "You remember what happened the last time."

"That was business, this is personal," she said. "Come on." He trailed her through the door, bells jingling merrily when she opened it.

“Reservation for Romanoff,” she told the receptionist.

“Of course!” he said. “Welcome to Lissage, and congratulations, Mr. Barton, on your impending mating!”

“I, ah, thanks?” Clint said.

“Right this way!”

As they followed the receptionist back through a heavy door, Clint leaned over. “How’d he know that?” He whispered.

“I booked you a mating package, hush,” Nat said.

Clint had no idea that was even a thing. He was beginning to think he should have paid more attention to rom-coms at some point in his life.

Within ten minutes, they were wrapped in fluffy sage-green robes, sitting on velvet chaises with mimosas on the table in front of them, each holding a clipboard on which they were supposed to indicate their preferences for various options, none of which Clint had any preferences about.

“Nat, what’s a Brazilian Pluck and do I want one?”

“I doubt it,” she said. “They pluck all your genital down. Leave you bald as an egg down there.”

“…*Why*,” Clint said, horrified.

“Because it costs seventy bucks and they can convince people to do it,” she said. “Skip the Brazilian, just have them touch up your chest so you don’t look scraggly, and make sure you pick the unscented options; you don’t want to interfere with your pheromones.”

Clint wrote a big NO by the Brazilian Pluck and went down the list, checking “natural unscented” next to everywhere that had the option, then making the rest of the decisions more or less at random. Then he went back and underlined the NO a couple times for good measure. By the time he was done, they’d been collected by an energetic spa employee whose name tag read “Crissy!!” Her feathers were nearly the same green as her smock, and her sincere and bubbly congratulations on his impending mating were both very sweet and a little overwhelming.

She collected their clipboards and deposited them into a sauna, handing each of them a big insulated bottle full of chilled water with a sippy top and directing their attention to the stack of towels by the door for their convenience before bustling back out again. Clint sighed, then stripped off his robe, hanging it on the hook provided for that purpose, and spread out some towels on the bench, sprawling out on his stomach with a sigh and letting his wings stretch out into the heat. Natasha mirrored him on the other bench, and he pillowed his head in his arms and turned his face enough to grin at her across the narrow space when their wings brushed.

“It feels weird, doing this without Phil,” Clint said. “I mean, I know that would kind of defeat the whole purpose, plus probably we might have trouble stayin’ decent right now, but still, sauna feels like it should be a flock thing.”

“He won’t mind,” Natasha said. “He’s got a five-page list of stuff to do today, he’ll be glad we had fun.”

“Wow,” Clint said. “He should have taken the day off like I did.”

She snorted. “He *did*, Clint.”

Clint blinked. “Then what—wait. He’s… for, for me? For our dinner, he has five pages of things to do?”

“I mean, don’t tell anyone, but I think he’s a little invested in making sure he shows you good time,” Natasha said, dry. “Seeing as how he’s been building up to it for weeks. I think we’ve run ops with less comprehensive schedules.”

“He didn’t have to go to *that* much trouble,” Clint said. He felt a guilty squirm in his belly. “I mean, I know I said I wanted—but I didn’t mean for him to, to *stress* about it.” Did Phil think he was, like, a high-maintenance nightmare now? Was Clint being a jerk, like the people on those reality shows Phil watched? “Maybe I should call him.”

“Stop that,” Natasha said, because she was probably a wizard and could always seem to tell when he was going down a negative self-talk rabbit hole. “He’s the one who started courting; he’s the one who decided to do it that way. He’s doing this because he wants to, because it pleases him to make you happy.”

“But he doesn’t need to run himself ragged to make me happy, Nat,” Clint protested. “I’d be fine with whatever, long as he was there.”

“Of course you would, but he thinks you deserve more than ‘whatever,’” she said. “Clint, you know what he’s like. Remember my first birthday with SHIELD?”

Clint did. Natasha hadn’t known her birthday when she joined up; apparently the Red Room wasn’t big on that sort of thing, and she had so many fake IDs that she had no idea if any of them had any ground in truth. When she’d hired on, she’d picked a day, and they’d built her ID packet around it.

Phil had been quietly horrified by the whole thing, and had made it a point to have a team—they weren’t flock yet, then, but they were definitely team—party when the chosen day rolled around. He’d baked her a cake (enlisting Clint to find out what kind she liked) and gotten her a card and made a little banner for the senior agent break room and somehow figured out everyone that Natasha actually liked at SHIELD and gotten them to come as well. It had been… kind of overelaborate, to be honest, and more than a little dorky, but absolutely sincere. Natasha had blinked at the little food table (complete with plastic tablecloth printed with balloons and HAPPY BIRTHDAY in glitter writing) and the banner and the little stack of envelopes with her name on the front, and smiled, small and real, and Phil had looked as

happy as though he'd personally, like, saved New York from a swarm of mutant locusts or something.

Clint remembered thinking how sweet it was, unnecessary but so kind, and that was Phil all over, wasn't it? It really was.

"He does tend to be kind of extra," he admitted. "I mean, with us, anyway. And, like, Captain America stuff."

"It's how he shows he cares," Natasha said. "And he likes doing it, so please don't burst his bubble by telling him to just get you takeout, or whatever you were thinking of doing. Just enjoy yourselves; you've both been waiting for this a long time."

"Yeah," Clint said. "God, it's been, what, a couple months since we started courting?"

"Since you made it official, but now that I know what to look for I think it's been coming for a lot longer," Natasha said, which: fair. "But I'm glad you got there eventually. The whole courting rigmarole isn't for me, but I'm happy you're happy."

Natasha conducted her own romantic affairs on a strictly need-to-know basis. Clint thought she was having some kind of friends-with-benefits thing with a lawyer over in Hell's Kitchen, or possibly a flock of several lawyers, but she didn't bring it up much. He was pretty sure she knew he'd be happy to talk about it if she ever wanted to; in the meantime, he gave her the gift of space, because he knew she had some issues about talking about her sex life with people from work.

Seriously, it was almost a shame she'd already obliterated the Red Room, because Clint would have liked to deliver a strongly-worded letter about the way they treated their trainees.

Wrapped around an arrow. Shot through their eye sockets.

But anyway.

The conversation lapsed for a while as they basked in the heat. Eventually, right around the time Clint had finished his water, Crissy came back to collect them and take them to another room, where she and a blue-crested guy called Jean-Marc gave them a "MicroRenew Exfoliating Body Treatment." This mainly consisted of getting scrubbed down with loofahs, rinsed off, then scrubbed down with some kind of soap that had, like, sand or something in it, rinsed off again, and then slathered in goop and wrapped up in waterproof sheets with just their heads and wings sticking out. Then, while the goop soaked in, they had something similar done to their faces, only with a steam wand and no loofahs.

"So, Mr. Barton, what are you using for your skincare routine currently?" Crissy asked, slathering something that felt and smelled like mud on his face.

"Um… soap?" Clint said.

She paused. "Well, don't worry, we'll get you all sorted," she said briskly.

From the other side of the room, Natasha—who was having something arcane done to her brow-feathers that involved a tiny brush and some kind of high-tech tweezers— chuckled. Clint decided that discretion was the right way to go and ignored them.

Showering the goop off left Clint sensitive and faintly pink, his skin tingling; he did his best not to think about how it would feel for someone (Phil) to touch or kiss him now, because they still had a few hours left at the spa and so far the spa had involved very little wearing of pants and he didn't want to be rude to Crissy and Jean-Marc by getting all Yankee Candle all up the joint, or even worse, getting turned on enough to leave stains on the nice robe.

He cooled his ardor by imagining a Brazilian Pluck until he'd calmed down. *Ugh*.

The next thing on their schedule was a massage, and it was great; Crissy was a lot stronger than she looked, and she found knots Clint hadn't realized he had. He definitely needed to bring Phil with, next time; he was always getting headaches from working at the computer too long. When Clint was properly relaxed from the massage—aka, limp like noodles and about to go to sleep—Crissy covered most of him in sheets and went to work on his "Sleek And Shine Deep Conditioning Hot Oil Feather Treatment," which was so relaxing he actually did doze off a little in the middle of it. The last thing on the agenda was a manicure and pedicure, and Clint carefully didn't think too much about why exactly he made sure that his nails were short and extra smooth, though Nat did smirk at him knowingly.

When they were done, Nat—who had apparently already paid for everything, because she was sneaky that way—went back with him to his place to help him get ready, which mostly meant keeping him chatting while he got dressed so that he'd forget to get nervous, and occasionally offering fashion advice. After waffling for a while, Clint had settled on wearing something nice but not overly formal: cream-colored linen pants that fell loosely from the hips but managed to drape alluringly (or so he'd been told) over his ass, and a top that he'd bought at a thrift store but never before been daring enough to wear. It was a jewel-purple silk brocade halter that was cut in the front to look like a suit vest, but was almost entirely backless save for small strips that went around the neck and waist. His bare arms and shoulders were still a little glossy from the spa goop, and his feathers were soft and shiny from the hot oil thing, and he could almost hear Barney in his ear demanding if he was really planning to go outside wearing that thing, like he was sixteen again and displaying in front of the townies after the show.

"I can't wear this, I'll look like a floozy," he moaned, though he couldn't help posing a little in the mirror.

"That thing's a Gaultier, it's too expensive to look cheap," Nat said. "Put some jewelry on if you feel too exposed, but don't you dare change, Phil's going to swallow his tongue when he sees you."

He put in his earrings—the hoops, because he liked to play with hoop earrings with his tongue and he hoped Phil might be the same—a silver-and-amethyst bracelet Phil had given him as a courting gift, and the chunky silver rings he liked to wear when he was going out, then grabbed a chocolate brown pencil from his dresser and held it out to Nat pleadingly. "Do my eyes?" he asked. "Just a little, I don't wanna go full raccoon later."

“Don’t forget to take it off properly at some point,” she said, taking the pencil. “Look up.”

He held himself as still as he could, following directions as she carefully smudged a thin line along his lashes, enough to make his eyes look bright and dramatic.

“There,” she said. “Now the shoes—no, the brown ones—perfect.” She walked around, inspecting him, reaching out to straighten a stray feather.

“Well?” Clint bounced up on his toes, feeling full of nervous energy. “Will I do?”

“He’ll swoon,” she said, leaning up to kiss his cheek. “Sure you don’t want to bring an overnight bag?”

“I have a go bag at Phil’s. Plus, you know, I don’t wanna look pushy.”

“You wouldn’t, but suit yourself,” she said. “Now, come on, I’ll drop you off.”

“I was gonna get a car,” Clint said. “You don’t have to go out of your way.”

“Clint,” she said. “It’s important. Let me drop you off.”

He looked closely at her, and he could tell she really wanted to; he wasn’t sure if it was because they were her flock, or because she was worried he’d ruin his feathers on the way without supervision, or what, but when she really wanted something, he’d almost always give it to her.

“Sure, then,” he said. “Thanks, Nat.”

She grinned. “Then lock up, Barton, and let’s get you to your mate.”

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Clint had been to Phil’s bower before, lots of times. He kept a go bag there (they all three had bags at each other’s places), plus he had a spare key (ditto), so he had no reason to feel anything but comfortable there. For some reason, though, he found himself standing on the doormat like a Girl Scout who only had shortbread left, his pulse thrumming as he tried to get up the nerve to knock.

It wasn’t that he was afraid—he honestly couldn’t imagine anything that would ever make him afraid of Phil—but he was suddenly nearly sick with nerves. Everything was going to change once he went through the door. It would be good—he knew it would be good—but it would be different, and some lingering anxious corner of his soul had decided to kick up a last-minute fuss, shrieking that he was a greedy fool, risking what he had to try and grab even more.

Clint took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and remembered Phil's slow, sweet courtship and his grand display, the way he'd looked and sounded and smelled when he asked Clint to come to his bower. Then he told that little voice to shut the hell up.

Mentally, of course. He didn't want to go talking to himself right in front of Phil's door. That might give the wrong impression.

He knocked.

Phil opened the door with a speed that kind of suggested he'd been right behind it, which was equal parts embarrassing (had he looked out of the peephole and seen Clint lingering there like a dumbass?) and reassuring (had he just been standing there waiting for Clint to turn up? For how long?)

"Clint, hi," Phil said, and then he pretty obviously took in Clint's ensemble and sort of… stopped talking for a minute, his eyes going wide. Clint tried to flex, subtly, while giving Phil a once-over of his own. He was wearing his glasses, Clint noted with delight, the thick frames making Phil look homey and approachable and also sexy, like he should be some kind of hot professor pin-up or something. He had on charcoal-gray pants and one of his finely tailored shirts, this one a sky blue that brought out his eyes. Instead of the usual tie it was unbuttoned—*two buttons*—and Clint could see his throat, and he wanted to get his mouth on it *really* fucking badly. He opened his mouth a little to scent Phil, and yes, god, there it was, that spicy-rich smell that Clint just wanted to lick off Phil's skin. He took half a step forward, then remembered that they were still just standing in the doorway staring at each other, and that presumably Phil's neighbors would prefer it if they took their pheromones behind Phil's scent-filtered door.

"You look amazing," Phil blurted, then bit his lip. "I mean, you always look—just. Today is. Extra good."

Clint grinned at him, happy that at least his own sudden illogical nerves seemed to have some company. It always made him feel more steady if he had another person around who needed steady. "You too," he said, reaching out to skim a daring finger along the open V of Phil's collar. "You lookin' for company, handsome?"

Phil went a little pink along the ears—and ooooh, he had on an *earring,* and there was another thing Clint really needed to get his mouth on before the night was up—and backed up, waving Clint into the apartment. "Of course, I'm sorry, please come in," he said, backing up in front of Clint as he walked like Clint was royalty he wasn't allowed to turn his back on. "Thanks for coming."

Several cheesy lines about how that part was for later came to mind, but Clint resisted using them; he didn't need lines with Phil, or to keep up any kind of persona. It was harder, being real, but it was worth it.

"Thanks for asking," Clint said softly, and he meant dinner, and he meant Phil's display, and he meant the courting, and the friendship, and all of it; he meant everything Phil was to him, and in that moment it seemed almost ridiculous that one relatively compact person could

contain so much. That was Phil, though, Phil all through; he was always so much more than people expected him to be.

Clint sighed, and then realized that Phil's apartment smelled fantastic, and that wasn't completely down to Phil wearing his collar open so all his pheromones could get out.

"Is that dinner I smell?" he said, moving out of the foyer and into the apartment, then pausing when he caught sight of Phil's dining table; there was a tablecloth, and flowers in a big vase in the middle, and tall candles; it looked fancy in a way that Clint hadn't even known Phil had the necessary equipment to achieve. "Aw, Phil, that looks great!"

Phil relaxed a little, shoulders dropping and wings relaxing by a few degrees, and he grinned at Clint. "You like it?" he said. "It was my mom's stuff, I dug it out of storage for the occasion. I thought—I mean, I think she'd be happy for me to use it for my mate-meal."

Clint's chest squeezed a little. Phil didn't talk about his parents much, just enough for Clint to know he loved and missed them; he felt like being fed his mate-meal on Phil's mom's table stuff was, like, the relationship equivalent of being knighted or something.

"I'm honored," he told Phil, "I love it," and he basked in the way Phil's face lit up, like he'd been worried that Clint wouldn't like it or something, which: what the shit, there was *no possible way on earth* that would ever happen.

"Dinner's mostly ready, there's just a minute or so left on the kale," Phil said. "Please, have a seat." He pulled a chair out for Clint, paused for a moment looking at him, then something in the kitchen dinged, and he hurried over to pull a pan out of the oven. Clint leaned his elbows on the kitchen island, watching as Phil moved around the kitchen, dishing up food. He had his sleeves rolled up, and Clint just basked for a minute, watching his corded forearms flex as he worked—worked on their mate-meal, the meal Phil'd planned out and made, just for them to eat together to seal their commitment. He felt fizzy with joy and also a little solemn, like he was watching something precious and rare. Any other time, he'd have offered to help, but Phil was obviously working from a system; he had everything laid out on the counters and Clint could see a piece of paper stuck to the fridge with a magnet that Phil kept glancing at. Clint tried not to read it—it seemed impolite, somehow—but he couldn't help seeing a list of times and catch a phrase here or there. Preheat Oven, Shower/Change, Wash Kale… Phil really had planned this like a mission. Clint felt warm all over at the further evidence that Phil was trying so hard, taking this so seriously. He wanted to hug him.

Well, he wanted to do more than that, but. Right *now*, he wanted to hug him. For starters.

"Hey, babe," he said, then realized he'd never actually called Phil that before and stopped in the middle of his sentence.

Phil looked up, startled but pleased, a little smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. "Yeah?"

"When you get to a place you can pause for a minute, c'mere?"

Phil replaced the lid on a pot and wiped his hands on a dishtowel, coming around the island to Clint. "Everything okay?"

“Everything’s great,” Clint said. “I just forgot something.”

“What do you need?” Phil looked like he was ready to run out to a bodega or dig through his closets to get whatever it was Clint wanted, and Clint just smiled at him, helplessly in love.

“This,” he said, and reached for him. He tugged, just a little, and Phil came eagerly into his embrace. Clint sighed in contentment, resting his head on Phil’s shoulder and nosing aside the edge of his collar so he could smell him better, slipping his arms around Phil’s waist and resting his hands daringly in the small of his back, beneath his wings, skin-hot and thrilling. Phil shivered, letting out a breathy little sound that lit Clint up all over, and his own hands—which had been resting safely on Clint’s hips—slid back over the thin band of silk and up onto his bare back.

Clint’s fingers clenched without consulting him about it as he sucked in a breath. Phil’s hands were shockingly cool on the feather-warmed skin, and Clint felt like if he looked beneath his wings he’d surely see handprints there. For a long moment, he was tempted to push further; he wanted to feel skin, wanted to see Phil bare for him, wanted to draw out more of those tiny noises.

A timer pinged in the kitchen. Phil tensed a little in his arms, and Clint found enough self-control to pull back.

“Thanks,” he said, unable to resist a parting stroke along Phil’s flanks. “I needed that.”

Phil cleared his throat. “Me, too,” he said. Whatever it was pinged again, and Clint smiled at the conflicted way Phil looked back over his shoulder.

“Take care of your stuff, babe,” he said. “We’ll get back to this later.”

Phil pulled back with one last little squeeze. Clint watched happily as Phil finished up, wreathed in steam and making more delicious smells waft into the air; it was simple and homey and at the same time oddly sexy, and Clint wanted it forever, even though he had never previously thought he was really cut out for a domestic life.

This time, Clint let himself be seated at the table as Phil brought out dishes and lit the candles before finally sitting down himself. Instead of putting them across the table from one another, Phil had them beside each other, kitty-corner; it was nice, Clint thought. They could see each other but were still close enough to touch.

“I wanted to ask you,” Phil said, clearing his throat. “I—of course, if you’d rather not, that’s completely fine, but… I’d like to do this the traditional way, if you want to?”

“Like, with the feeding and all?” Clint blinked, a little surprised. Traditionally, the alpha would feed the omega (or the court-er would feed the court-ee, nowadays people mated in all combinations) the first bite of each dish of the mate-meal. It was meant to symbolize a commitment to feeding you through pre-heat, fucking you through heat, and then defending you when you were full of eggs and couldn’t move fast, but in modern times it was more a promise of general caretaking and commitment. These days, though, most people didn’t go to

the trouble of the full ceremonial thing, just swapped bites and called it a day. Clint had seen it in movies, but he didn't know very many people who'd actually done it.

"Only if you want," Phil said, his ears going pink. "I know it's a little… excessive, nowadays. But if you didn't mind, I… I'd like to do it."

Clint thought about it. Before, he'd always thought the practice was kind of cheesy, but sitting here, looking at Phil ruffling his feathers with nerves, his eyes bright in the candlelight, he wanted to know how Phil would look, what he would say. Would he have memorized one of the traditional vows? Or was he planning on improvising?

"I think I'd like that, too," he told Phil, and was instantly sure he'd made the right choice when he saw how excited Phil looked at the prospect. "Do you want me to close my eyes?"

"No," Phil said. "I already know you trust me; I'd rather us be able to see each other."

"Okay, then, babe, this is your show," Clint said. "I'll follow your lead."

Phil smiled, and picked up his fork. "Clint," he said, and had to pause, his voice catching a bit. "I offer you the first meat from my table, gathered and prepared by my hands." Traditional vows, then; Clint wished for a moment that he'd memorized the responses, but then reminded himself that Phil loved him the way he was, and that the best thing he could do was tell Phil what was in his heart.

"I accept it gladly," Clint said softly.

Phil gathered a bite on the fork and held it out, one hand cupped beneath to catch any stray drips. His hands were shaking, just a little, just enough for Clint to see. Clint smiled at him, reassuring, and opened his mouth, leaning in so Phil wouldn't have to reach too far and taking the bite. He couldn't help a little noise when the flavor hit his tongue. It was amazing; some kind of rabbit stew, he thought, the meat meltingly tender and the sauce rich with bacon and cream.

"When you need me, I will be there," Phil continued, "and your needs will be like my own." He cut another bite—a piece of roasted potato. "I offer you the provision of my bower, the strength of my arm, and the speed of my wing, whenever you need them."

"I accept them." Clint ate the potato. It was fucking delicious, and so was the way Phil watched Clint's mouth, intent and almost reverent. He wanted to jump out of the chair and sweep Phil up and kiss him forever, but more than that, he didn't want to spoil this moment.

The kissing would come soon.

The third bite was roasted kale, savory with crackly brown edges. "I offer you a place in my nest, whenever you wish it." Phil licked his lips, his gaze flicking down to the curves of Clint's bare shoulders before going back to his face.

Clint grinned. "I accept the *hell* out of that," he said, and Phil grinned back at him as he fed him the bite. When he'd swallowed, he looked at their plates and saw there weren't any more

dishes. “So, ah, is there more?” Usually the movies skipped ahead.

“Not until dessert,” Phil said, setting his fork down. “Sorry, too over the top?”

Clint reached out and took his hand. “It was perfect,” he said, and leaned over to kiss Phil, just for a second. “I loved it. And I’m looking forward to eating the rest of this, that was all awesome.”

Phil ducked his head, smiling. “Well, in that case please go ahead,” he said, and then they both started eating, and the atmosphere relaxed a little; it hadn’t been stressful or anything, really, nothing bad, but it was like they’d reached an unspoken agreement to dial back a bit for a moment, let the sexual tension ease while they ate. Clint still watched Phil’s expressive hands and his pretty eyes, the creases of his cheek when he smiled, and loved them and wanted them; he still let himself enjoy the spicy underlay of Phil’s pheromones beneath the food. But he also enjoyed the conversation, the company; even from the start, Phil had always been such good company. It was hard not to stuff himself with the food—seriously, he’d had no idea Phil could cook like *that*, the man’d been holding out—but he managed to resist overburdening himself by keeping his eyes on the prize.

So to speak. He couldn’t literally, just then. Phil was sitting down, and also wearing pants.

Not that the prize was just Phil’s body. It was obviously Phil in his entirety. But the body was pretty much the main part Clint hadn’t gotten much experience with yet, and he was extremely ready to broaden his horizons.

Clint dragged his mind back into a more high-minded place as Phil brought out the dessert; strawberry shortcake and whipped cream. It was kind of out of season, but it was one of Clint’s favorites, and he had no doubt that Phil would have somehow found good fruit despite the fact that all the ones Clint saw in the store were pallid and sour this time of year.

Phil put their dishes down, and shot Clint a questioning little look. Clint nodded, happy to finish out the ceremony that Phil had taken so much trouble over.

Clint hadn’t previously thought he had much in the way of Opinions over what made up a perfect bite of strawberry shortcake, but Phil apparently did, because he took some time loading the fork with precisely calculated amounts of fruit, cake, and cream, his forehead creased adorably in concentration. When he was satisfied, he held it up.

“I offer you myself, to be your mate,” he said, quiet but full of conviction. “To be your partner in heart, nest, and life, for as long as we both wish it.”

“Oh,” Clint said, and he blinked, hard; his eyes were stinging. “Phil. I—of course I accept, give me that,” and he grabbed Phil’s hand and tugged it over, eating the bite as fast as he could, like he could actually eat Phil’s words and bind them further that way, make sure Phil knew how very much he meant it. Phil smiled at him, wide and sweet; he looked so happy at Clint’s eagerness that Clint suddenly needed to do something else, something more, to make it even more clear that just as much as Phil was choosing him, Clint was choosing Phil right back.

Before he was even done swallowing, he was loading his own fork and holding the bite—much less tidy than Phil's had been—out towards him.

"I offer you me, too," Clint said. "All that you said. When things are good and when they're shit. I'll have your back and you'll have mine. And I'll love you—I do now, and I'm going to keep on with it, because there's absolutely nothing you would ever say or be or do that could make me stop. And you've been so great while we courted—doing all of this, doing everything for me—but I'm going to take care of you, too. And it's gonna be incredible, Phil. I can already tell that. We're gonna be amazing together." He started to gesture with the fork, and caught himself just in time to avert disaster.

Phil smiled at him, his face soft and alight with joy. "We will," he said, his voice intent and tender and so happy Clint could hardly stand it. "I know it." He curled his hand around Clint's, to steady it, and ate the bite of shortcake.

Clint probably should have been a bit more careful; it was a little awkwardly big, and Phil got whipped cream on the corner of his mouth that Clint was going to see in his dreams. But Phil didn't look like he minded. As soon as his mouth was free, he turned his hand over, so they were sort of holding hands around the fork. He looked into Clint's eyes, and Clint felt like he might spontaneously combust.

"Then may our lives together be rich and sweet," Phil said, softly, "for so long as we choose to fly side by side."

"Fuck yeah," Clint said, because it was either that or "amen," and he kind of thought that would strike the wrong tone.

The shortcake, naturally, was delicious, just like everything else had been, but Clint admittedly didn't really stop to savor it. He was getting pretty anxious to get to the *real* dessert.

That being Phil. In case anyone was confused. Clint's mate.

His *mate*. Clint wriggled a little in his chair from excitement. This was going to be *so awesome*.

Chapter End Notes

So, a couple more notes before I forget.

Pronouns: In the English that the bird-people speak in this AU, there would either be one set of pronouns (essentially, everyone is they/them or similar) or there would be four. I actually considered doing this; I even got as far as working out what they could be (ahim/ahis, aher/ahers, ohim/ohis, oher/ohers if you are curious) but I finally decided not to inflict that on you, since you were already having to learn a new gender spectrum, new genitalia and other anatomy, and a ton of new social rituals and customs just to read

the story. Also, since in this world alphas and omegas are distinguished by scent instead of physical characteristics, they would need to have neutral pronouns to refer to people whose genders are not known anyway.

Plumage: Most of the characters are just given a main color, but I based some of their coloration on real birds. The bird-people have feathers or down everywhere a human would have hair. For the characters we know, their crest-feathers grow in a shape that approximates their human versions' hairstyle.

Natasha's crest is true, brilliant scarlet - think of a scarlet finch. Her wings are a similar color along the leading edge but darken down to black near the tips of the feathers - something like a cross between a pine grosbeak and a firefinch.

Clint and Barney have plumage very like red-tailed hawks, although Clint looks like the more buff/tawny/gold ones and Barney looks like the more russet/rusty/reddish ones. Clint's crest I envision as looking a lot like one of the crested eagles - likely a Philippine eagle - in shape, but in color they are buff to golden brown.

Phil's plumage is based on several birds with really interesting courtship rituals, as befits him. His crest feathers are short, fine, and dense, much like penguin feathers, and a shade darker than his wings. His wing feathers look black in most lights but when they hit the light they have a dark blue sheen; think of a satin bowerbird. His under-wing electric blue is based on the superb bird of paradise and the Victoria's riflebird.

Fury's wings look like raven wings, but there is a persistent rumor that nobody can trace back to a source that they're dyed, and he actually has brilliant multicolored plumage that he deemed inappropriate for a spy. He plucks his crest.

Hill has wings like a shrike.

Victoria Hand's feathers are like a violet-backed starling, but a bit darker.

Eat Your Heart Out, Yankee Candle

Chapter Summary

> Clint licked his lips. “I’d like to get to know my mate a little better,” he said. “By which I mean, what’s the minimum amount of stuff we need to do to clean up dinner? Because I would like for us to do it and then I would like to kiss you. A lot.”

Chapter Notes

> Back again with some hot birdman makeouts for you! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Clint had finished the last bite of cake, he set his fork down and looked over at Phil, who was looking back at him, smiling softly. When Clint caught his eye, his smile turned a little sheepish, and he ducked his head.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to stare.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Clint told him. He felt like he’d burst, he just felt so good. “You can look at me whenever you want to. I like the way you look at me,” he added, and it felt a little like a confession. “It makes me feel… good. Special.”

“You *are*,” Phil said. He reached over and caught Clint’s hand, squeezing.

Clint squeezed back. “Well, you too, so that works out okay,” he said. He took a moment just to look around the scene one more time before they moved forward, just to fix it in his memory forever. How had he gotten this lucky? To mate Phil, he would have swapped bites of truck stop hot dog in the parking lot of a Travel America and been happy. What Phil had done for him—what Phil had *given* him, not just the material things but the love and care that had gone into every item on his damn five-page list—was so far beyond amazing that Clint wondered if there was an upper limit to joy, if at some point he’d just white out with bliss like an instrument getting readings way outside its range.

“So, hey,” he said. “Guess what.”

“What?” Phil said, stroking over the back of Clint’s hand with deliciously calloused fingers.

“We’re mates now,” Clint told him, and thrilled from crest to toes when Phil closed his eyes and shivered a little at the words, like it was overwhelming to think about even after Phil had

spent months courting Clint for that very purpose.

“Yes,” Phil said, and his voice had gone low and rough.

Clint licked his lips. “I’d like to get to know my mate a little better,” he said. “By which I mean, what’s the minimum amount of stuff we need to do to clean up dinner? Because I would like for us to do it and then I would like to kiss you. A lot.”

Phil’s mouth dropped open and he sucked in a breath; scenting, and Clint knew what he’d be getting; he could feel his whole body responding to his emotions and Phil’s own scent, his pheromones going honey-thick and sweet with bonding cues and spicy with arousal, pumping out in a great rush now that Clint was no longer focusing on trying to have a little decorum until they finished the mate-meal.

Yankee Candle all over the place, he thought, grinning.

Phil swallowed, his throat working visibly, and his own pheromones deepened in response; he smelled *delicious*. Clint wanted to *lick* him.

Clint was *gonna* lick him. Real soon now. But he had certain Ideas about how he was hoping the rest of the night—and the next morning—would go, and there was no room in any of those plans for “the kitchen is still wrecked and we have to clean up before coffee.”

Clint picked up his dishes and headed for the kitchen.

Phil shook himself a little, then did the same. “I, ah, I mostly cleaned up as I went,” he said, and sure enough, all that was visible in the kitchen was the strawberry shortcake components.

“Great,” Clint said. “Not much to do, then. Here, gimme.” He took Phil’s handful of dishes and turned on the water, rinsing them off before putting them in the dishwasher while Phil put the leftover dessert away. They finished at about the same time, and Clint made an executive decision that anything else that needed doing could wait for a more opportune moment. Like, say, tomorrow.

Or next week.

He reached out and caught Phil’s hand. “C’mon, babe,” he said, giving Phil his best flirty look. “Let’s get comfortable.”

“Anywhere you like,” Phil said softly. His hand was actually shaking a little, and it made Clint want to, to recite love poems or free-climb the Chrysler Building and hang a giant banner saying “I <3 YOU PHIL” from the spire, or to wrap his wings around Phil and kiss him for a year and just… hold him close and shielded from anything that would ever hurt him. Clint’s stomach felt like it was doing a tumbling routine. But, like, in a good way. The way where you don’t know what’s coming, but you know it’s going to be the best thing ever.

He was tempted to go for Phil’s nest immediately, but… there was no hurry, after all. They were mates now, and they’d only do this for the first time once; he wanted to savor it. Plus, it would give them both a chance to work out their first-time nerves before too many articles of

clothing came off. “Let’s start on the couch,” he said, rubbing the back of Phil’s hand with his thumb, “and progress from there.”

They went into Phil’s living room, and Clint pulled him to sit on the couch, settling his wings over the short back with a little flick and letting go of Phil’s hand to slip an arm low around his waist. Phil’s feathers brushed over the bare skin, warm and silky.

He hummed. “You feel so good,” he said, leaning in and brushing the words against Phil’s cheek, nosing softly back to his ear. “You have no idea how much I’ve wanted to feel your feathers on my skin, especially since you displayed for me. Your wings are fuckin’ spectacular.” He nipped gently at Phil’s earlobe, flicking the hoop with his tongue, and Phil jumped a little, then melted into the touch. He tipped his head to make more room as Clint ran his lips gently over the shell of Phil’s ear. Clint carded his fingers through the soft down at the base of Phil’s wings, making him shiver; it was soft and silky and Clint thought he would never get tired of touching it. This close, Phil’s smell almost made him dizzy, not because it was strong but because it was so *good*. Clint could count on one hand the number of times he’d smelled Phil without some kind of chemical moderation, and most of those times had been on missions gone to shit where mostly what he’d gotten off Phil was adrenaline and stress. This was so different; pure Phil, but with the sweet-and-spicy overlay of attachment and arousal pheromones.

“You knew what my wings look like,” Phil said. “You’ve seen them before.”

“That was different,” Clint said, pulling reluctantly back from Phil’s ear so he could talk.

“How so?” Phil leaned forward in turn, letting himself lean his weight against Clint’s side, and nuzzled at the scent gland just under the hinge of his jaw, sending a jolt through him as his pulse sped impossibly faster. It wasn’t just the feel of it, but the knowledge that Phil was getting Clint’s scent all over his lips, which was so hot it threatened to white out Clint’s brain with sheer want.

“That was work,” Clint said, managing—barely—not to lose the thread of conversation. “They weren’t for *me*, then. Didn’t feel right to look at ‘em. Not, y’know. In a sexy way.”

“You can look at me any way you want,” Phil said. “Blanket permission. I, ah. I like it.” He ran his hands up and down Clint’s bare arms, not light enough to tickle but gentle, tender. “Your skin is so soft. How is your skin so soft with as much training as you do?”

Clint chuckled, mentally thanking Natasha for not letting him change out of the halter top. “Nat took me to the spa this afternoon,” he admitted. “I’ve been uber-moisturized, you wouldn’t believe how many different kinds of goop they put on me today.”

“Huh,” Phil said. He leaned close again and breathed deeply. “You don’t smell like skin stuff. You just smell like… you.” He darted his tongue out and licked across Clint’s scent-spot. “Smells great.”

“It was all unscented,” Clint said. “*Fuck*, that feels good. Because, well. It was our mate-meal and all. Didn’t want to interfere with the pheromones.”

“Mmmm. Good call.” Phil nuzzled again, pressing closer, and Clint whined; it felt so good, and also it filled him with a fierce, greedy lust to know that every movement was spreading more of Clint’s smell on Phil’s face, so Phil would smell and taste him with every breath. It would linger for days, letting everyone who got near Phil know that he had chosen and been chosen, claimed and been claimed.

“I want to taste my scent on your mouth,” he gasped, and Phil jerked in Clint’s arms, then let out a groan.

“Yes, that, however you want,” he said, and lifted his head out of Clint’s neck just enough for Clint to see his face; he was flushed, his eyes wide and bright behind the now-smeared glasses. Clint wanted to do everything imaginable with him.

He started with a kiss.

Phil’s lips were soft beneath his, parted just enough to be an invitation but not a demand; going at Clint’s pace, in this too as he had been the whole time. It was an invitation Clint was definitely going to accept, just as soon as he’d finished tasting his own pheromones on Phil’s mouth, which was rapidly coming to be one of his new favorite flavors. Phil was stroking his arms, arching into Clint’s kiss, his wings fluttering whenever Clint found a particularly sensitive spot at the base, but he was still being a little more reticent than Clint wanted, like he’d been letting Clint set the pace for so long that he couldn’t do anything else. Clint wasn’t really surprised; Phil was careful, and this was important. They were just getting to know each other in this new context, and though they’d spent countless hours in conversation, both during the courtship and before, they hadn’t gone into much detail about what they liked in the nest beyond establishing that they were both definitely in favor of ending up there together.

Now, though? It was time to get a bit more explicit with their communication.

He licked his way into Phil’s mouth and used the hand at the small of Phil’s back to pull him in closer, angling his body so that he could feel more of Phil against him, hooking their ankles together.

He pulled back just enough to speak. “C’mon, babe,” he said. “It’s time. It’s our time. You don’t have to hold back anymore.”

Phil rested his forehead against Clint’s, his breathing fast. “I don’t want to do more than you want,” he said. “I never want—you waited this long, I don’t want to push you.”

“I won’t let you do anything I don’t want,” Clint promised, interspersing the words with sipping kisses. “I’m not sure there *is* anything I don’t want from you. Least not anything you’re likely to do.”

“Okay,” Phil said. A determined expression crossed his face, one that always meant good things in a mission context and that Clint was pretty sure would mean even better ones in an intimate one. Then Phil gripped him hard, and Clint flapped his wings ungracefully as he found himself moving, fetching up on top of Phil, who was now sprawled out across the couch with his wings splayed out underneath him while he was splayed out beneath Clint.

“This okay?” Phil asked. He sounded a little breathless, and Clint was basically in the same boat; Phil’s chest was firm and warm beneath him, Phil’s thighs were solid and muscular around Clint’s hips, and Phil’s gorgeous blue under-wings spread out around him, just right there for Clint to see and touch and look at—for him, this time, offered up to him.

“This is so much more than okay.” Clint smoothed his palms over the crisp cotton of Phil’s shirt, tugging his collar more open and leaning down to take his own turn giving attention to Phil’s scent spots, licking and nuzzling and nibbling. Phil made the most amazing sounds, his hands running greedily up and down Clint’s bare arms and shoulders, then stroking at the base of his wings until Clint moaned against Phil’s throat.

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Yeah, touch my wings, it feels so good.”

Phil obliged him, pushing his fingers through the feathers to stroke over the sensitive skin, until Clint’s wings flared out involuntarily from pleasure, knocking something off an end table.

“Shit, sorry,” he gasped, raising his head to try to look around and figure out what he’d done. “Where—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Phil said, tugging him back down and kissing him, deep and plush and lingering. “I’m not.”

“‘Kay,” Clint agreed, then recaptured his mouth for another long kiss, finally ending with a soft suck on his bottom lip. “So, hey,” he said, running his lips down Phil’s face to revisit the scent-spot under the hinge of his jaw, delighting in the throb of Phil’s pulse. “Can I unbutton your shirt?”

“Please,” Phil said, leaning up to kiss Clint again. “I’d ask the same, but—” he slipped a hand down from Clint’s wing to stroke over the band of silk low on his back. “I’m kind of enjoying yours where it is.”

“You just let me know if that changes,” Clint told him, then raised up a little, propping himself up on his forearms on Phil’s chest so he could reach his buttons. The fact that this drove their hips together harder was a side benefit.

(He could feel how wet he was, so wet he could feel the slide of it as he shifted, his hole relaxing; his slit was soaked, too, tingling and eager. If he hadn’t been wearing pants, his cock would probably be out by now. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d gotten so worked up with all his clothes still on; probably one of those nights out behind the big top when novelty and teenage hormones made everything seem bigger and better than it was.)

He traced the vee of Phil’s shirt with a finger before he undid the first button, prolonging the anticipation just a moment longer and loving the way Phil’s breath caught when Clint touched him there. He undid all the buttons in quick succession, but didn’t pull the shirt open yet. Instead, he went back up to the top and kissed his way down from Phil’s collarbone, nudging the shirt fronts aside with his chin as he went. Phil’s chest was every bit as lovely as he’d known it would be; he’d seen Phil shirtless before, after all. It was different now, though. Now, Phil was shirtless with intent; those thick muscles and soft skin and the

scattering of fine dark down were being offered up to Clint to kiss and touch and explore, and he was taking advantage of the offer like an insomniac calling now to get two SlapChops for the price of one.

That metaphor had maybe gotten away from him a little. He blamed the intoxicating heat of Phil's skin and the mouth-watering layer of his scent that bloomed when Clint pushed his shirt open more.

He started interspersing gentle nips and soft licks with his kisses, delighting in finding spots that made Phil buck up under him, that made Phil's hands clutch at Clint's skin or sometimes, thrillingly, in his feathers. Clint took his time, sometimes going back up or moving over to one side if there seemed to be promising territory there, but eventually he got down to the waistband of Phil's slacks. His own legs were half off the couch, by this point, his elbows braced on either side of Phil's hips and his body mostly resting between Phil's thighs—which was in no way a bad place to be—and Phil's hands kept moving restlessly from Clint's head to the tops of his shoulders, like Phil wasn't sure where they'd be welcome.

Clint rested his chin on Phil's belt buckle and looked up at his flushed, beautiful face. "You can put your hands on my head if you want to," he said. "I don't mind a little, y'know, direction." His crest was up about as far as it could go, anyway; may as well put it to good use.

Phil groaned, a short, punched-out sound, his hips twitching beneath Clint's chest. "I don't want to pull out any feathers," he said roughly. "You feel so good—I'm worried I might."

"I don't think you will," Clint said. "But even if you do, totally worth it."

Phil looked at him for a moment, and Clint tried to make his expression seem calm and sure and not, say, stupid with lust; he must have done okay, because Phil slid both hands into his crest, the ruffled feathers sliding between his fingers, and it felt so good Clint had to close his eyes for a minute to keep from rolling them off the couch and going at it right on the floor. Not that he was *opposed* to doing Phil (or Phil doing him) on the floor, just… not the first time, and not when Phil's nest was *right there* on the other side of the wall.

When he was confident he had things under control, he opened his eyes again to drink in the expression on Phil's face, awed and hungry at the same time, and just let himself look at Phil and feel the tender slide of his fingers and shiver with delight.

"That feels *so good,*" he told him.

"So does that," Phil said, jerking his chin toward the place where Clint's fingers were playing with Phil's waistband, dipping barely underneath it and then back out again.

"It can feel better," Clint said. "If you want—can I get in your pants?"

"*Yes*," Phil said, hissing it a little as Clint nipped the soft skin just above his belt buckle. Clint made short work of it, then unbuttoned and unzipped, suddenly halfway to desperate to see what was underneath.

What was underneath, it turned out, was silky and purple. Clint couldn't hold back a soft little sound—somewhere between a gasp and a moan—at how good it was to see Phil wearing Clint's favorite color underneath his clothes.

Phil made a questioning noise, stroking along Clint's temple with his thumb, and Clint looked up.

"They're purple," he said. "I love purple."

Phil smiled, his face so soft and warm that it made Clint squirm, like it was overloading his circuits or something to process that much blatant affection. "I know."

"I. Did you." Clint swallowed, because he didn't want to sound self-obsessed but also *Phil* was wearing *silky purple underwear* and Clint had to know if this was like a mate-night thing or what. When he'd seen Phil changing during missions he'd always been wearing neutral-colored cotton. Was that just a work thing? Was Phil secretly a lingerie fanatic in his off time? "Did you get those for, for tonight or…"

Phil… *blushed*, the faint flush of exertion and arousal already on his face deepening along his cheeks and the tips of his ears. He looked uncertain for a moment, then squared his shoulders, flexing his fingers in Clint's crest like he was reminding himself of what was underneath his hands.

"I bought them after you accepted my suit," he said softly. "I… maybe it's silly, but I… I liked feeling them underneath my clothes and knowing they were there, that I had something that meant *you* with me, all the time."

Clint had to clench his ass against a surge of slick as he parsed what Phil was saying. "Phil. All the time? Like, *all* the time?"

The blush deepened. "Yeah," Phil admitted. "I bought enough that I could wear them every day. I mean, they aren't all—" he nodded down at his lap, "for special occasions, they're mostly material I can machine-wash, but. They made me feel close to you." He looked down, biting his lip. "And admittedly I may have… enjoyed… speculating as to your reaction if you—*when* you found out."

Clint couldn't even speak for a minute, like his brain was completely locked up processing the nuclear-level erotic imagery that was spinning through his brain. Phil wearing purple underwear. Phil wearing purple underwear *at work*. In meetings. In meetings with *Fury*. In a *Congressional hearing,* at least once. Wearing them and thinking of Clint and going home and, and… picturing Clint seeing them, picturing Clint…

Picturing Clint doing exactly what Clint is going to do r*ight the hell now.*

"Holy *shit*, Phil, that's so hot, please can I pull your pants down some," Clint babbled, his hands clutching at Phil's hips, crumpling the fabric of his pants. "I want to see, I have to see them, please can I?"

“For the—*oh*—for the rest of the evening you have blanket permission to remove any piece of clothing you want,” Phil said. His voice was rough, like he’d been panting and dried out his throat, and it was so sexy Clint could hardly stand it.

Clint wasted no time tugging Phil’s pants down—Phil, ever a good partner, lifted up enough to make it easy—and leaned in to inspect the tiny, square-cut shorts. Phil’s hands tightened in his crest, pushing him ever so gently down, and Clint was *all for that*; he leaned in farther, so close he could feet the damp heat radiating off Phil’s crotch, so close that every breath was scented with Phil’s mating pheromones, unadulterated and straight from the source.

The fabric of Phil’s underwear was so thin it practically molded to his body. Clint could make out the gentle puff of his pubic down and the top of his slit; since Clint himself was between Phil’s legs, he hadn’t been able to get Phil’s pants low enough to see the whole thing, so all he could make out was a tease of a line, disappearing into shadow.

“Let me lick you,” he whispered, and Phil cursed, his hips arching just as his hand pulled, and Clint lost his balance a little and tangled his foot on something and slipped, narrowly preventing himself from face-planting into Phil’s crotch by throwing his weight to one side. Which was successful, insofar as it avoided any kind of unfortunate tooth-to-tender-bits collision, but unsuccessful insofar as it resulted in Clint flailing, squawking, and tumbling right off the couch. He landed with a thud on the floor, his head stinging where he was pretty sure he’d lost some feathers to Phil’s instinctual grab and his wing aching where he’d jammed it hard against the coffee table.

“Ow,” he said plaintively. “No fair.”

“I’m so sorry,” Phil gasped, doing a bit of flailing and wing-flapping of his own as he tried to disentangle his pants and his legs enough to sit up. “Shit, Clint, are you okay?” He looked in horror between Clint on the floor and his own double handful of tawny crest-feathers. “I am *so sorry*. Do I need to get the first aid kit?”

Clint patted the nearest bit of Phil—his calf—reassuringly. “Babe, I’m fine, I was more surprised than anything,” he said. “No real damage done. But maybe that’s a sign that we’ve taken the couch thing about as far as it needs to go tonight.”

Phil drooped a little before very visibly pulling it back. “Of course, I completely understand, sweetheart,” he said, dropping the feathers in his hands with a wince and reaching out to stroke gently over Clint’s cheek. “We’ve got plenty of time, after all. Would you like me to call you a car, or I can drive you home—”

“Whoa, wait, time out,” Clint said, cutting him off with a sharp gesture. “No no no no no. I didn’t mean we needed to stop, you know—” he waved at their general disheveled state. “Just that maybe we need to move somewhere with more room so we can really get comfortable.” He appreciated Phil’s restraint—after the number of people whose interest in him had begun and ended purely in the realm of the physical, the fact that Phil valued Clint’s comfort and happiness more than his own orgasm meant the world to him—but he was beginning to think that if he didn’t get Phil naked and get his mouth on him very soon he might just vibrate himself into another plane of existence through sheer desperate lust.

Phil's wings trembled, the feathers rustling, but Phil was holding his body very still. "Where, ah…" he swallowed. "Where would you suggest?"

Clint smiled at him, feeling warm and goopy, helplessly in love. "Well," he said. "I wouldn't want to overstep any boundaries. But I'd really like it if my mate—" Phil shivered again at the word, and Clint privately resolved to use it as often as possible if Phil liked it that much — "would invite me into his nest for the evening."

"It would be my honor," Phil said, somehow managing to sound solemn and wanting at the same time, making Clint shiver in his turn. "To invite my mate into my nest for as long and as often as he wishes to be there." His chin lifted, and he looked really quite noble and dignified for a guy who was still kind of hobbled by his own pants.

"That'll be a *long* time," Clint promised. "So let's get it started, yeah?" He held out his hand, and Phil took it, and they maneuvered their way to their feet with only a couple undignified flaps. Phil hitched his pants back up and did up the button so they wouldn't fall, and led Clint back to the hall that led to his nest.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the sex cliffhanger, but the sex scene is MASSIVELY LONG so I had to break this part off. Two more chapters to go!!

A Consummation Devoutly To Be Wished

Chapter Summary

> ....they have sex. They have a lot of very good sex and they are in love and they are super happy. That's it. That's the chapter.

Chapter Notes

> This may be the filthiest thing I've ever written and simultaneously the schmoopiest. I'm sorry/you're welcome?

Clint had been in Phil's bower plenty of times, but he'd actually never seen his nest before. A lot of people keep their nests really private; Clint didn't, so much, because he'd grown up mostly in various kinds of communal living arrangements, but Bobbi did. The first time they'd had people over to their new bower after they'd nested, Clint had been giving the tour and had gone to open the door to the nest, and she'd looked at him like he'd suggested inviting them to watch while they fucked. Since then, he'd always tried to err on the side of privacy until he was specifically told otherwise.

He thought Phil likely was a private-nest person, because his bower was the kind laid out with a dressing room separating the nest from the rest of the space, like a tiny, grooming-centric airlock. As he followed Phil inside, he made sure to shut the outer door behind himself before Phil opened the inner one.

Welcome to the Inner Sanctum, a cheeky voice in his head murmured. The Holy of Holies. The Heart of the—

Clint cut off the inner commentary as he crossed the threshold. Phil was standing a little nervously off to the side, so that he didn't block the view of the room; he had his arms folded in front of him in that way he did when he was trying not to show an emotion. Clint looked around curiously. It was a great nest, really; the nest itself was big enough for them both to stretch out in a variety of positions without getting crowded, with a similar low end for ease of entry to the one that Clint's own nest had. Its inner walls and the top edge were all leather-upholstered, well padded so that a person could get comfortable propped or braced against them any way they liked. The nest-linens were misty gray-blue, with a huge heap of pillows in jewel-like blues and purples, and Clint shivered to see yet more evidence of Phil choosing colors for his most personal uses that would remind him of Clint. The lights in the room were soft, casting enough of an indirect glow that you could see but not bright enough to glare in your eyes, and the whole place smelled pleasantly of Phil, his soap and his cologne and his

pheromones, woody and citrusy and spicy with the sweet overlay of his mating-smell. It was cozy, Clint thought; cozy and perfectly Phil, and he hoped he'd be spending a *lot* of time there from then on.

"It's so you!" he said, turning to face Phil. "I love it."

Phil relaxed. "Yeah? You don't mind the—"

Clint cut him off. "I love it all," he said, not wanting Phil to dwell on whatever aspect of the room he'd been feeling nervous about. He glanced at the nest. "So, ah, I hope you won't mind if I say that I would really, really like for us to take our clothes off right now and go mess up that nest a little."

"That's a great idea," Phil said. "Only, if you don't mind, I'd like to… help you." He stepped closer, reaching out and laying a hand on Clint's silk-covered side. His touch felt hot through the fabric, and Clint's wings rustled.

"Sounds great," Clint said. "I mean, I already kind of had a turn, so…" he gestured at Phil's shirt, still hanging open over his bare chest. It was still all tucked in and fastened at the back. "Have at it?" He spread his arms a little as if to say, tah-dah! Here's your prize; one archer, slightly used, completely into you.

Phil leaned in and kissed his mouth, just a closed, tender press of lips that lingered for a long moment. "Thank you," he whispered, his face still so close that Clint could feel the air of it.

"My pleasure." Clint kissed him back, the same gentle close-mouthed sort of kiss, marveling at the way Phil's eyes crinkled up with happiness even if his mouth was too busy to smile.

"Well, I'll do my best," Phil promised, looking up at Clint through his eyelashes, his eyes bright behind his smeared glasses; it was an almost coquettish expression, one that shouldn't have worked on Phil's features. It did, though. Clint wanted to barricade them together in the nest and spread him out on heaps of soft things and alternately preen his feathers and make him come.

He was maybe starting to see the appeal of the airlock-door nest arrangement.

Phil laid a hand on each of Clint's hips then slid them up slowly, tracing the angled sides of the halter top as they wrapped around his torso. "You wear silk so well," he said, his hands stroking back and forth between the fabric and Clint's skin, like he was comparing their textures. "I don't think I've seen you wear it before. Do you like it?" His touches were just on the edge of ticklish, but firm enough that it felt delicious instead of annoying.

Clint swallowed. "Yeah," he said. "Just, I don't like dry cleaning, so. I usually buy stuff that's machine washable."

Phil's hands moved inward, tracing over the woven pattern of the brocade. "I could get you some," he said. His voice was quiet, intimate, like he didn't want anyone else to hear even though there was nobody around to. "For, ah. Special occasions? I could take your things to the cleaners with mine, it wouldn't be any trouble."

“You wanna dress me up all fancy?” Clint tilted his head back as Phil’s hands moved to the neckline of his top, baring his throat. “Pick out pretty things for me to wear for you?”

“God, yes,” Phil said. His fingers skated up the straps, then ran up the tendons of Clint’s neck and rubbed over his scent-spots, sending jolts of sensation down his spine and making his feathers lift, his skin feeling taut and electric with desire. “I know you like adornments when you’re off-duty. I’ve always loved how they looked on you. But getting to choose them, maybe help you put them on, and then see how you make them beautiful… I’d love it, Clint.” He brought the fingers of one hand to his face and scented them, his mouth open wide. “You smell so good.” He stroked his fingers down his own neck from chin to collarbone, spreading Clint’s scent even further, and Clint locked his knees against the wave of lust that knocked him pliant.

“You, too.” Clint rested his hands lightly on Phil’s hips, trying not to get in his way—he seemed to have a pretty definite idea of how he wanted this whole undressing thing to go—but his hands felt wrong, being not-on-Phil. He just wanted to touch. “I’d wear anything you bought me,” he said, his voice catching as Phil finally started undoing his buttons, deliberate and intent. “I know you’d never pick anything I’d hate.”

“Never on purpose,” Phil said, looking up. His eyes were brilliant in the soft light. “And if I did by accident, I’d hope you’d tell me so I could fix it. I—” he bit his lip. Clint wanted to kiss it better, but tabled the thought for later. “I like the way you dress,” Phil said at last. “It suits you, and I want you to look how you like to look. I don’t want to change you, just… maybe spoil you a little.”

Clint squeezed Phil’s hips, pulling him in close enough to drop a kiss on his cheek before putting him back at appropriate unbuttoning distance. Phil moved with him, easy as anything, and Clint shivered at the thought of all the other ways he might soon be moving Phil around. “I get you, babe,” he said. “And like I said. I wanna wear things for you, because it’s you. It’ll make me happy to make you happy. That’s how all this is s’posed to work, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Phil said, starting on the buttons again, carefully easing them through the tiny buttonholes, careful not to pull or snag. Clint’s abs twitched as Phil worked his way down, and when he finally finished and spread the top open over his chest, smoothing down Clint’s skin with his palms, Clint groaned a little at how amazing it felt.

“How’s it fasten in the back?” Phil leaned in to kiss his way across Clint’s collarbone.

“There’s—mmmm—hooks at the bottom, the top just goes over my head,” Clint said, running his hands up under Phil’s open shirt to rest on the bare skin of his flanks.

“Lift your wings for me?” Phil asked, and Clint stretched his wings out cautiously, trying to make sure he didn’t bang into anything; he was feeling a little flail-y. Phil stepped in close and slipped his arms around Clint’s waist, skirting beneath the base of his wings. A few tugs of his clever fingers opened the hooks, then Phil stepped back, pulling the sides of the shirt with him so the whole thing was just draped around Clint’s neck like a strangely-shaped scarf.

Phil lifted the halter up over Clint's crest, more careful of stray feathers than Clint ever was, and then went over to his own closet and hung it up, carefully refastening it enough to make it hang properly. He even pulled up the weird little ribbons on the sides and put them over the edges of the hanger.

Huh. So that's what those were for.

"My turn," Clint said. "Open your wings?" He stepped up behind Phil where he was still facing the closet and ran his open palms down over the glossy feathers where Phil's wings met, making them quiver under his hands. Phil's shirt was finely tailored to him, the opening for his wings so close-fit that you couldn't see any skin.

"How the hell do you button this up behind your back by yourself?" he asked, starting to unbutton the placket on the lower back.

"Practice," Phil said. "And a buttonhook."

"I've only got a buttonhook in case I need to stab somebody with it," Clint confessed. "Usually I get stuff with velcro. Or a tie. You know, easy on, easy off."

Phil turned his head to look at Clint over his shoulder, smirking. "Oh *really,*" he said. "Tell me more."

Clint laughed. "You know what I mean. Hey, undo your pants?"

"On demand," Phil said, and did; Clint pulled his shirt tails untucked so he could reach the last few buttons.

"Okay," Clint said. He helped Phil out of the shirt, then looked over Phil's shoulder at the closet, gave a mental shrug, and just handed the shirt to Phil, who took it with a cheeky little grin and tossed it into the hamper. When he turned around to face him, Clint could see that he'd buttoned his pants up again.

"Aw, pants," he said. "We keep going in the wrong direction with those."

"My turn," Phil said, gesturing at Clint's waist, and well, what was Clint gonna do, *not* let Phil take his pants off?

"Okay, but my turn again after," he said.

Phil grinned. "Counting on it." He leaned in for a sweet kiss and then ran his hands back down over Clint's chest to his waist. "These pants look amazing on you, by the way," he said, trying for a casual tone but running aground somewhere around covetous as he traced the arch of Clint's hips backward to cup his ass, squeezing gently as though to test the resilience. "The way they drape over your body… I keep wanting to walk behind you just to watch."

"Glad you like 'em," Clint said, leaning in to steal a kiss.

Phil's warm hands smoothed down Clint's ass to his thighs and then up again, stroking the muscles, before he came back to the front and finally unfastened the pants. They were cut

loosely enough that once they zipper was down they more or less fell right off in a thwump of linen, and Clint could hear Phil suck in a breath as he took him in, nearly bare, with his pants around his ankles and his wings still half-spread, wearing nothing from the ankle up but a pair of clingy microfiber underwear, seamless and snug-fitting and nearly the same color as his skin. Even Clint himself couldn't tell he was wearing them under the pants.

Well, visually, at any rate. He could still feel them. They were really soft.

He was distracted from his underwear musings by a soft thump, and looked down to see Phil, fuck, *kneeling in front of him*, his wings spread out behind him like robes.

"Step," he said, his voice rough, and he guided Clint's feet out of shoes and pants both, then seemed to vapor-lock or something, just staying on the floor staring up at him, his eyes brilliant and hungry behind his glasses, Clint's pants seemingly forgotten in his hands.

Clint felt hot all over, like Phil's attention was a sunlamp; he wanted to do a dozen contradictory things at once, anything to keep Phil looking like that and smelling like that, because of him. His wings fanned out, the creamy undersides showing in a half-display, and Phil sucked in a sharp little breath.

"You are so beautiful," he said, almost to himself.

"Takes one to know one," Clint said nonsensically, bending down to kiss Phil's half-open mouth. "Which, speaking of, you gonna get up so I can take off your pants now?"

"In a minute," Phil said. "I want—can I—"

"Go for it," Clint said, because there was pretty much nothing he wouldn't let Phil do if just thinking of it made his eyes shine like that. "Whatever you want."

Phil tipped forward, his hands coming up to cup Clint's ass, and buried his face low in Clint's belly, just above the waistband of his underwear. He took deep breaths between nuzzling and kissing his way from one hip to the other, mouth open like he wanted to gulp down Clint's scent. It felt so good all Clint's feathers stood on end. Clint laid his hands on Phil's head, as light as he could, stroking over Phil's short, plush crest while Phil kissed his way back to the center of Clint's body.

"I can taste you," he said, voice still quiet and roughened with his desire, thrilling Clint from wingtip to crest. "I can feel it. The heat of you, here." He lifted a finger and traced down, skimming over the line of Clint's slit and punching a low groan out of him; how could such a tiny point of connection feel so immense? Clint trembled under the touch, locking his knees and forcing himself not to just mash Phil's head into his groin like his cock could somehow phase through his undies and right into Phil's open mouth.

"You're a little wet," Phil said, his tone sounding almost awed. He licked his fingertip, head still just inches away from Clint's body, and the pink flicker of his tongue might as well have been on the tip of Clint's cock; his hands tightened in Phil's crest without any input from his brain as every muscle in his body seemed to seize up with the desire to go every way at once.

“I’m so wet I’m basically a walking slip and fall hazard, you mean,” he managed to say. “Not my fault my mate’s the hottest thing on wing.”

Phil buried his face in Clint’s thigh, the tips of his ears gone pink. “That’s you,” he said. His hands crept back and traced over Clint’s crack, where he was even wetter than in front, so much he could feel his cheeks sliding over each other whenever he moved. “Fuck, Clint. I could *drink* you.”

Clint guessed Phil didn’t mind licking slit, then.

Cool.

“So take your pants off,” he managed to say, though he was maybe kind of holding Phil quite firmly where he was, “and put me down in your nest and *do* something about it.”

He felt a quiver run through Phil’s body where it pressed against him, heard his wings flutter, then Phil was moving, getting his feet under him and his arms around Clint’s hips like steel bands. Clint laughed, not because it was funny but because he was so happy, breathless with delight as Phil picked him up. He wrapped his legs around Phil’s hips and his arms around Phil’s shoulders, fanning his wings out, and he caught a glimpse of Phil’s face bright and feral before Phil tipped them forward and Clint fell into a soft heap of pillows, Phil’s body solid and hot all down his front. He tugged Phil’s head up and kissed him—he couldn’t do anything *but* kiss him, mouth wide and graceless like he was a fledge getting his first taste, Phil meeting him with every bit as much hunger.

“Pants,” Clint gasped into Phil’s mouth, because he was nothing if not persistent and Phil was wearing silky purple undies and Clint wanted to take them off him with his *teeth.* Phil made a grumbly noise, but got up—Clint immediately missed him, but forced himself to be patient in the service of getting more Phil-skin to touch—and shucked out of his pants, tossing them carelessly over the edge of the nest before kneeling right back between Clint’s legs, his wings flared so that Clint’s vision was full of glorious Phil, looking at Clint like he was some sort of divine visitation.

Well. Maybe not *divine*. Not unless you were talking one of the… *earthier* pantheons. But still. It was a really good look.

Clint arched a little into the pillows, and Phil swallowed hard, his throat working visibly. It was good to see, good to know that he apparently affected Phil—his mate, his *mate*—as much as Phil affected him. “I’m in your nest,” he pointed out, mostly just to see the look on Phil’s face when he said it. It was a very satisfying sight.

“Yeah,” Phil said. He reached down and stroked Clint’s cheek. It was such a little thing, especially after everything they’d done already that night, but it shook him. Something about the tenderness in that careful touch, coupled with the resplendence of the way Phil was kneeling above him, wings spread and face keen with purpose, made him feel… humbled, and fortunate.

And very, very horny.

Clint turned to kiss Phil's hand, then craned his head around, checking out the relative positions of him and Phil and the sides of the nest, and got a mental image that he immediately wanted to make happen.

"There's something I want to do, hang on," he told Phil, and wriggled his way a bit more upright against the pillows, so that he was propped up at a better angle. "Okay, come up farther," he told Phil. "Straddle me, okay? Put your knees here." He indicated the spots on either side of his waist, just below his spread wings.

It took a little more shuffling to get Phil's legs on the outside of Clint's instead of the inside, but before long he'd taken the place Clint had shown him.

"Excellent," Clint said happily, grinning up at him. "Lean on the edge of the nest? I wanna —" he made grabby hands at Phil's hips, which fit neatly into his palms as Phil obediently braced himself on the lip of the nest, putting his body at an angle just above where Clint was propped up.

"Yeah, darlin', perfect," Clint said. Phil's groin was at an ideal height, the fabric of his undies stretched by the spread of his thighs, which were taut and gorgeous against Clint's flanks. He had his wings wide, almost mantling over Clint, blocking out the light and enveloping him in a dim, warm space that smelled deeply like Phil and increasingly like Clint. It was even better than Clint's imagination had been able to dream up, and it was *real*.

He ran his thumbs over the arches of Phil's pelvis, covered in silky purple. "I love these," he said. "You don't know what it does to me, thinking about you wearing 'em all this time, going around being all badass with *my color* under your suit."

Phil had his elbows on the lip of the nest and was hanging his head down between his arms, watching Clint with hot eyes. "Probably about the same thing it did to me, hoping you'd take it that way."

Clint felt triumphant and smug and humble, all sort of at once. "You gonna keep doing it?" He leaned up, resting his forehead on Phil's belly in a mirror of what Phil had been doing to him, taking deep scenting breaths that made his mouth water and his body clench with heat.

"If you like it this much? Absolutely," Phil said. He was trying to sound calm, Clint could tell, but his voice was throaty and low, intimate and sexy and anything but calm. Clint loved it.

"If I *like* it, he says." He kept rubbing over the material, skin-hot and sleek over Phil's skin. "My *mate*, going around looking all neat and put together like James Bond, all handsome and polished, and underneath it? Underneath it's *this,* all special just for me?" He couldn't help taking a taste of Phil's skin, feeling the muscles tremble under his tongue. "Fuck, baby, I don't think 'like' is anywhere *near* being a strong enough word for how I feel about that."

He nuzzled his way down Phil's belly, using his lips and the tip of his nose to trace a gentle line along the trail of down that started low on his abs and ran underneath the purple satin. Phil's hips bucked when Clint got to the top of his slit, and Clint tightened his grip, letting his fingers press into the meat of Phil's ass.

“Easy, love,” he said, only moving far enough away for Phil to hear him. “Let me have this, you dressed up all pretty for me, lemme play a little, I promise I’m not teasin’ you. We’ll do everything you want, we got plenty of time.”

“Any—anything you want,” Phil said, breathless. Clint could see his chest moving as he sucked in air, but he firmed his muscles beneath Clint’s hands and set his weight more firmly and went still.

“*Yeah*,” Clint said, humming approval, and he could feel a quiver in the muscles under his hands, but Phil didn’t move. “Yeah, just like that, that’s great, thank you.” He’d been going slow, drawing things out, but Phil deserved a reward. Clint tipped Phil’s hips to a slightly better angle and traced the seam of his body with his tongue. Double-As like Phil didn’t usually get as wet as the other genders, but he must have been turned on for just as long as Clint had been, because his undies were damp and salty with arousal. They both moaned at the same time, and Clint was determined to get more of that, more of the taste and more of Phil’s pleasure. More of *everything*.

He licked harder, firming his tongue and pushing up into Phil’s slit through the fabric, feeling around for—yes, *yes*, there it was, the tip of his cock just peeking out; Clint loved that about double-As, the way you could get their cocks out so easy, even before they were naked sometimes. He pushed his face up into Phil, licking around the nub and feeling it pulse, slipping out more and more until he could wrap his lips around it. Phil’s thighs were shaking, now, hot little grunts punching out of him as Clint worked, but he was still braced, keeping still. Because Clint had asked him too.

Clint wanted to keep going, to suck on Phil’s cock now it was out far enough, see how long Phil could take it before he couldn’t stay still anymore. He didn’t want to make Phil come yet, though, not until they’d talked a bit about how they wanted this night to go. Plus, Clint’s mouth was getting a little dry, so it was probably time to lose the shorts, sexy though they were.

He pulled back, wanting to see his work. The fabric was soaked through now, dark and clinging to Phil, outlining the soft, plump edges of his slit and the emerging head of his cock. Clint blew on it, and Phil made an amazing noise: like an engine trying to turn over, but sexy.

He ran his hands up Phil’s back, burying his hands in the soft feathers at the base of his wings. “Thank you,” he said, resting his head on Phil’s hip. “So *good,* Phil. I love it. Maybe c’mon down here now, take these off before I give in to temptation and just rip ‘em?”

“*Please,*” Phil said, already moving; he swung one leg over Clint and pulled the underwear off, shuddering as the wet satin peeled away from his skin. He kicked them down toward the bottom of the nest and turned back to Clint, still on his knees above him with his wings fanned out. His cock had come out even further, glistening-slick; it was gorgeous, flushed and fat. He looked like porn, only better, because he was *Phil.* Clint felt itchy all over with want. He put his hands on his own waistband, wanting to be naked too.

“Wait,” Phil said, and Clint froze.

“Yeah, babe?”

“Can I? I mean, I’d like to—” he gestured at Clint’s hips, and Clint licked his lips, arching back into the pillows and giving Phil what he sincerely hoped was a come-hither look and not a dumb one.

“Go for it,” he said, and Phil hooked his fingertips under the waistband and pulled them down in one smooth motion. Clint shivered as the air hit the wetness between his legs.

“So here I am,” he said, running a hand down his own chest to rest just above his pubic down. “Got anything particular in mind you wanna try?”

Phil looked down, crest ruffled and eyes bright. “I want to make you come,” he said. “As many times as you want, as many ways as I can. I want to bring you so much pleasure my nest smells like your slick for a week. I want to give you everything, Clint, I want to do *everything*.”

Damn, and Clint had thought he was turned on *before.*

“*Fuck*, baby,” Clint managed to say through the haze of lust that Phil’s impassioned words had triggered. “Yeah, that sounds so good. I want that too, the same thing for you. Wanna rock your fuckin’ world.”

“You already are,” Phil said, and his voice was… he sounded… like he was *praying*, almost, rough and fervent and unguarded and sincere. Clint could hardly believe, even still, that all that feeling was for *him*.

“Just being here,” Phil stroked Clint’s thigh, fingers curving inward but stopping just short of Clint’s slit, just barely brushing the wet down. “You make it so good for me. Tell me what makes it good for you. Tell me how you want me to touch you, sweetheart, help me do it right, I want it to be perfect for you.”

Clint swallowed hard, clenching his thighs together; his cock would be out as soon as he opened his legs at this point, and he suddenly wanted it to come out into Phil’s hand or mouth or, hell, against his leg—into contact with Phil somehow, anyway, and not just into the air. “It will be,” he said, and his own voice came out surprisingly hoarse. “Darlin’, it *will* be, because it’s you doing it. I’m so completely stupid in love with you that you could, could tell me you can only come if I dress up like a *mime* and I would go get some face paint and a stupid hat.”

Phil snorted a laugh, relaxing a little, and Clint grinned up at him, helplessly charmed. “I mean it,” he said. “Just say the word and I’ll start pretending my dick’s in an invisible box.”

“Oh god, please don’t,” Phil said, fully laughing; the intensity of the moment eased a little, but Clint was pretty sure neither of them were any less turned on.

“I love it when you laugh,” he said. “I love the way you look at me, how you touch me. Just being in the same room with you gets me all hot and bothered, so I know I’ll like whatever you do.” He patted Phil’s hip, valiantly resisting the temptation to put his hand into the more interesting areas quite yet. “But I know you’re an overachiever, so if you want to—the way I can come the most, keep going the longest, is if I start with my cock, then go to my hole, then back to my cock again. Like, like bookends, yeah? I dunno why, it just—I can keep going a

long time if I do it that way, and then the last one on my cock is like the cherry on a sundae. I'll pretty much go to sleep right after it, though, so… that should be the last one, if we do it that way. You don't have to, though. Seriously. I'm in your nest and you're my mate. Everything after that is just… the icing on the world's most awesome cake."

Phil's hand clenched down on his thigh. "How many times can you come that way?"

"Um… I haven't really counted," Clint admitted. "Enough to wear me out, anyway. Six or seven, maybe? More sometimes, depending on hormones an' shit."

"That might be enough," Phil said, body poised and jaw set like he was ready for a challenge, and Clint had never previously realized that Phil would make the same faces on a mission that he did in bed, but now he was never going to forget it.

Phil tugged on Clint's thigh, and he let his legs part, making room for Phil to settle in between them, Phil's wings folding over them like a blanket as he nestled into the space. "Cock first, right?"

"Yeah," Clint said, his voice coming out thick with anticipation.

"Good," Phil said, and he bent his head and set his tongue at the base of Clint's slit, then plunged it in, a long, curling lick that went right down *in* and wrapped around Clint's firming cock. While Clint was still trying to gasp and swear and flail his arms with how shockingly good it felt, Phil sealed his lips against Clint's slit and started sucking. Clint's cock came spilling out of his body and into Phil's mouth so fast and hard Clint thought for a stunned moment that he'd come already, before he'd even made it out all the way.

Phil gave another rippling, luxurious suck, coaxing more of Clint's length out and into his throat, and Clint's feet kicked the bed without consulting him as he concentrated on trying not to come too soon. Phil's mouth felt so good, his tongue felt *so good*, and Clint had been so turned on for so long; he was already desperate. His hand came to light on Phil's head again, making him hum. He crinkled his eyes approvingly at Clint, and Clint remembered that Phil had liked it, before, when Clint had moved him around.

He could do that. He could probably even remember not to yank out handfuls of feathers when Phil did something that felt especially good. Though if he forgot, well. Phil owed him a few.

Phil ran the tip of his tongue down the groove on the side of Clint's cock. Just as he reached the base, he slipped one finger down between Clint's legs and rubbed over Clint's aching hole; Clint arched clear off the mattress, almost bucking Phil off as he shot his first load. The orgasm felt almost wrenched out of him, all the muscles in his body going tight and then slumping back down into the nest in a heap.

Phil, who had used his ninja powers to keep his mouth sealed around Clint's cock the whole time, slid off with a lascivious little slurp. Apparently he hadn't been all the way to the base when he'd set Clint off, because it looked like he'd taken most of Clint's come to the neck and chin, and it was dripping down over his chest in shining rivulets. It was filthy and amazing, and then Phil scooped up one of the drips on the end of his finger and licked it off.

“You taste as sweet as you smell,” he said. “I like it.”

“Hnngh,” Clint said. He was still working on regaining the feeling in his extremities. “You. That. Yes.”

Phil grinned at him, looking smug. “Was that good to start?”

“To *start?*” Clint curled his legs around Phil’s hips, giving him a little squeeze. “That was *incredible,* babe.”

Phil ducked his head, his expression turning a little, pleased and almost shy. “I’m glad.” He ran his hands up Clint’s thighs, ruffling the wet clumps of down at the base of him. Clint’s cock was still out, but he’d lost the urgency with his first orgasm; he wouldn’t come there again without some further stimulation.

“Can I do more?” Phil said. He ran his fingers down, circling Clint’s hole, which twitched under his touch, leaking another little gush of slick.

“You—*yeah*, fuck—you sure you’re all right?” Phil was still idly stroking around Clint’s hole, and it felt like he was winding up a wire of lust inside him; he kept clenching down around nothing, and Phil’s cock looked like it would fill his empty spaces so perfectly. “Haven’t done that much for you yet.”

“Everything we’ve done has been for me,” Phil said. “You said you like it here now, right?” His finger nudged the tiniest bit inside, and Clint groaned deep in his chest; it felt so good but at the same time not enough; he wanted *more*.

“Yeah,” he said, pushing back into Phil’s hand, trying to get him further in. “Yeah, s’good, Phil, please more?”

Phil smiled, eager and a little sharp, like Clint was playing into his hand and he was about to get everything he wanted, which: *same*.

“Gladly,” he said, and Clint waited for him to finger him a bit more, get him good and open to fuck, but he just settled back down between Clint’s thighs, pulled him open wider with both hands, and licked across his hole with a broad, slow swipe of tongue.

“Ohfuck,” Clint said, sucking in a rough breath.

“In a minute,” Phil said, not looking up from Clint’s hole. “You’re so pretty here, I want to explore a little first.”

“Nobody ever—mmm—called it pretty, before.”

Phil finished making a little spiral around Clint’s hole with the tip of his tongue. “Then they weren’t paying attention,” he said. “Your skin’s all pink and golden, like a peach, and every time I touch you—” he gave another flat lick, his tongue soft and hot— “you get wetter, and it tastes so good.” He wiggled his tongue inside, curling it to lick up more of Clint’s slick, and when he raised his head to look at Clint, he was wet all around his mouth and down his chin, visibly glistening with Clint’s fluids.

“You, ah…” Clint swallowed hard, the sight of him like something out of a sex dream he’d never had enough imagination to actually have. “Whatever you say.”

“I say you’re delicious,” Phil said. “Everywhere.” He bent back to work, teasing Clint’s hole with his tongue; each thrust went a little deeper, tugging a little more on his rim. Clint could feel himself going loose and soft, getting impossibly even wetter as he finally got some attention on his sensitive inner walls, his body gearing up for the fucking Phil was promising.

Clint stopped even paying attention to the noises he was making, just let himself sink into the sensations, running his fingers through Phil’s crest and over the sides of his face to feel the way his jaw muscles worked. Finally, when Phil’d worked Clint over thoroughly as far inside as his tongue could reach, he pulled back a little, resting his head against Clint’s thigh, and nudged his fingertip back inside. Clint’s body opened without any resistance, and he groaned with how good it felt, to have something firmer than a tongue inside after the long build.

“Yeah, yeah,” he ground out, trying to arch into the touch. “Gimme more, c’mon, I’m so ready.”

“You *are*,” Phil said, voice soft and wondering. He pulled his finger back and returned with two, and they slid inside just as easily, feeling even better when Clint squeezed around them. “I barely even had to stretch you, it’s like your body’s welcoming me in. It’s so amazing.” Three fingers, now, in all the way to the knuckles, making wet sounds as he moved them in and out. Phil probably had Clint’s slick running down the back of his hand by now, maybe all the way down his forearm. Clint’s body had been primed by the long courtship and the day of anticipation, by Phil’s pheromones and his own fantasies. He hadn’t run this wet since the last time he’d had to do a half-heat for medical reasons—and he hadn’t enjoyed that anywhere near as much.

“I *am* welcoming you in,” Clint said. “I’d love to welcome *more* of you.”

Phil spread his fingers apart, and they both groaned when Clint’s hole stretched easily to accommodate them.

“Feels so good,” Clint said, rolling his hips as Phil rotated his hand, trying to get the bumps of Phil’s knuckles to rub up on the sensitive spots inside him.

“So do you,” Phil said, “so wet, and—the way your muscles squeeze down, it feels—Clint, can I be inside you? I want to feel this on my cock, please can I—”

“Yeah, *yeah,* do it, fuck me,” Clint said, his heart hammering and his skin feeling tight, his feathers lifted until even the movement of the air felt like a touch. “As much as you want—fill me up, I wanna smell like you.”

Phil’s hands spasmed, his fingers curling inside Clint in a jolt of sensation, then he pulled them out still bent, the feeling almost like removing a plug. Clint wondered why for about two seconds, then he realized that Phil had scooped out some of Clint’s slick in his cupped fingers when Phil started smearing it over his own cock.

Clint made an incoherent noise; it was ridiculously, absurdly hot. It lit him up even more, and from the careful way Phil touched himself, he wasn't unmoved either.

"Let me know if—if you need me to change anything," Phil said, and then he pressed himself to Clint's rim, and Clint clenched down around him with a grinding little moan of pleasure as he pushed himself inside. There wasn't any discomfort, just the long, sweet slide of being filled, Phil's cock every bit as good inside him as Clint had thought it would be. Phil's cock was long and thick and hot, slippery with the combination of their fluids, and Clint felt like he'd been waiting to feel it inside him forever.

When Phil was all the way in, his hips snugged up tight in the cradle of Clint's thighs, he leaned over, stroking up Clint's flanks and then out over his outspread wings, fingers running tenderly over the feathers and sending shivers down Clint's spine. Phil's own wings had relaxed out of the neat tuck he'd held them in while he was going down on Clint; the feathers kept brushing his legs, silky-warm, and adding another dimension to all the things Phil was making him feel.

"God, Clint." Phil moved a little, hardly enough to call a thrust, more a little roll of his hips. "You don't even know how many times I've imagined this. You. With me, in my nest like this. Letting me—touch you, *love* you. Be inside you. And the reality is better than anything I dreamed up. I can hardly move, I'm afraid I'll come already. Can, can you wait a little with me? Just—*ah*—just let me acclimate a little."

Clint felt all hot and melty, like a candy bar someone had left in the sun. "'Course I can, darlin'. You're so worth it." He reached up, caught Phil's hands and squeezed them, then pulled him gently forward, far enough that he could lean up for a kiss. "You take all the time you need." He settled back into the pillows, stretching his wings and arms out in exaggerated relaxation. "I'll just lie here and maybe just—" he squeezed down on Phil's cock, making his eyes roll back in his head with how good it felt. "Unnnh, yeah, that. So good. Wonder if I could make myself come that way? I think I might."

Phil whimpered. "Not… *helping,*" he said through gritted teeth.

"Come if you need to." Clint dropped his voice, almost crooning. "Baby, you got at least one more after this one, right? Maybe more, if you like to come from your hole like I do. You got nothin' to prove, here."

"I just, I want—" Phil broke off with a shake of his head, sweat glittering at his crestline. "No, you're right. But I want you to pace it—here, let's move a bit." He pulled out, leaving Clint distressingly empty, but before Clint could do more than make a disappointed noise and frown at him, Phil had settled himself against the edge of the nest, propped on yet more pillows, and was beckoning him over. Clint scrambled to his knees with a heave of his abs and a flap of his wings.

"Here, come here—ride me?" Phil looked up at him, eyes wide and pleading. "I want to see how you like it best, how fast or hard, what makes you come."

"Well," Clint said, "if you put it *that* way," and slung a knee over Phil's hips, letting Phil guide his cock back to Clint's hole and lowering himself just enough that the tip was inside

him.

“Any requests?” he said, teasing them both by drawing out the moment.

“Do it like you would if you were alone,” Phil said. “If this was a toy, and you had nobody’s pleasure to think of but yours.”

Clint groaned. “Fuck, babe, do you just sit around thinking of ways to blow my mind?” He couldn’t wait any longer; he sank down on Phil’s cock, the new angle hitting different places inside him. It felt so good—*Phil* felt so good, thick and hot and perfect. “You feel so good. Better’n any toy I ever had.”

“What do you like?” Phil’s mouth was bitten red, his eyes shining. “What do you do?”

Clint started moving again, tilting his hips so that Phil’s cock hit the best angle, finishing each downstroke with a little hip-motion to grind the tip right up against his walls. “Like to be full,” he said, his breath speeding up as he moved. “Like to take my time with it, like I told you. If I do it right—yeah, god—once I get started I can just keep going till I’m sore, come over and over till I’m ready to finish.”

“I want to give you that,” Phil said. He put his hands on Clint’s thighs, rubbing over his flexing quads. “Show me how, sweetheart, please.”

“Okay, I—okay,” Clint said, and closed his eyes for a moment; he couldn’t keep looking at Phil—the electric blue of his splayed-out underwings framing the sculpted muscles of his arms and chest, his expression as he looked up at Clint like he was seeing something extraordinary—and keep his composure for long. He leaned forward a little, rested his hands on Phil’s chest, and pretended that he was alone, in his own nest daydreaming about doing this with Phil, his only goal to get his first hole orgasm out of the way so he could sink into a chain of them, revel in the way his body could just keep wringing pleasure out of a plug or a dildo until Clint was sated and spent.

When he’d found the right pace and position, he opened his eyes again, drinking in the sight of Phil watching avidly as Clint pistoned himself on his cock.

“This what you wanted?” Clint’s voice came out in rough little jerks as the bottom of each stroke jostled him; he didn’t bother to try to smooth it out. He didn’t need to. “Watching me bounce on your cock like it’s a dildo I stuck to the bottom of my nest?”

Phil nodded, his throat working, hands clenching at Clint’s thighs. “Tell me about it,” he said. “Why you like it this way, tell me what it does for you so I can do it myself next time.”

Clint’s wings flared as he shivered all over with arousal. “It’s indirect, this way,” he explained. “You’re stimulating the good spots but not—*yeah*, fuck—not hitting right on them. I’d come quicker that way—mmm—but I’d get sore a lot faster. This way, I gotta work at it for—ah—for a while, but then instead of being too sensitive I’m just—revved up and ready for more.” He could feel the orgasm looming, coiling low between his hips like a snake stirring in the sun, and quickened his pace a little, letting himself push a little burn into his arms and legs to thrust harder. Under his hands, Phil’s chest was heaving, Phil looking up at

him wild-eyed and open-mouthed, gulping at Clint's scent and staring at him, eyes tracing his face and body in a combination of reverence and hunger.

"Are you getting close," Phil said, his voice shaky and thin, like he was hanging on by a thread. "You look like you might—Clint, are you going to come, please will you use my cock to make yourself come—" and that was *it*, that just tipped Clint the rest of the way over, and he drove himself down with his full weight and a great beat of his wings, grinding down to get Phil as deep as he could go while Clint's body clenched around him, his head thrown back as he cried out, overwhelmed with the pleasure. Before he was even done coming, he could feel Phil stiffen underneath him, and then Phil arched up as much as he could into Clint's weight and Clint felt the heat of his come, pumping into Clint's twitching hole as he came too.

They stayed that way for—Clint honestly had no idea how long for; for some amount of time—and then they both sort of collapsed at the same time, Phil slumping back down into the bed and Clint relaxing, settling more deeply onto Phil's cock and leaning more of his weight on Phil's chest as his wings settled, draping over the nest and Phil's legs.

"That was," Phil said, then made a gesture with one hand that could have meant "bomb" but was probably intended as "really awesome sex."

"Yeah, it really was," Clint agreed. "Wow." He clenched down around Phil's cock—he couldn't help it—and Phil grunted a little. "How, ah, how are you feeling?" he asked. "Like, we talked about how I like to come, but what do you like? You wanna space things out a little, or would you rather keep going like this, maybe give me both barrels?"

Phil groaned, low and rasping in his throat. "I—can I keep going, but move? I want—from behind, so I can touch your wings, during? If you'd like that."

"Oh *hell* yes." Clint leaned down to kiss him, enjoying the way it made Phil's cock move inside, then raised himself back up. He sighed despite himself when he got all the way off, his hole clenching unhappily around the empty space. Now that the initial rush of climax was over, his body wanted more. "Where do you want me?"

"The side of the nest is padded," Phil said. "If you wanted to lean on it, like I was doing before…"

Clint hummed happily. "Yeah, that sounds great," he said, his skin prickling at the thought of it. "Here, get up." He took Phil's hand and helped him get up to his knees, then pulled him in for a hug, squeezing tight for a moment before pulling back, eyeing the relative heights of Phil's cock, his own ass, and the side of the nest. He picked a likely looking spot and braced his forearms on the wide, soft lip of the nest, spreading his knees to give a solid foundation. He stretched his wings out, the tips of them brushing the edges of the nest, and looked at Phil over his shoulder; he felt like some kind of pin-up, and from the look on Phil's face, he probably looked like one, too.

"How's this? C'mere, see how you fit."

Phil crowded up behind him, fitting his knees between Clint's and resting his hands on Clint's hips. The tip of his cock brushed against Clint's thigh, wet and hot, and he wanted it back inside him *yesterday*.

"I feel like I'm about to wake up with wet sheets," Phil said, almost like he was talking to himself, his tone soft and amazed.

Clint wiggled his ass. "Then how 'bout you go ahead and start proving you're awake?"

Phil pressed himself against Clint's ass, breathing deep and slow. Clint was so slick that Phil didn't even need to pull Clint's cheeks apart to get his cock in; he slid over Clint's rim once, making them both gasp, and then Clint tilted his pelvis a little and Phil altered his angle and just… slid right in, smooth and easy like a key into a lock.

"You're amazing," Phil said, and he let go of Clint's hips to run careful fingers down between Clint's wings, tracing the delicate skin under the feathers. Clint whimpered. The tenderest parts of his wings were so sensitive, and so rarely touched; he couldn't really reach them himself and the kind of preening you did for flock didn't get down into the more erogenous zones as a rule. Clint pressed his wings down, spread as far apart as he could so Phil would have more room, and clenched his body around Phil's cock. He wasn't even moving yet, and already it felt so good; Phil behind him, Phil inside him, Phil's hands in his feathers and Phil's scent in his lungs. Clint felt wrapped up in his mate, treasured and safe, full of so many good feelings he felt like he'd spill over any minute.

"So good," he said, arching his back a little more, trying to get Phil in just a little deeper. "Phil. Do it. Fuck me and, and play with my wings. Just—try not to pull any feathers?"

"I won't," Phil promised. He started to move inside Clint again, setting a slow, steady pace; all the while, his long fingers ran through Clint's feathers, ruffling and stroking gently, setting Clint's skin alight with how good it felt.

"Yeah, like that," Clint said. "Yeah, god, darlin'—yeah, if you can keep that pace I'll come pretty soon." Phil had been paying attention before, and was giving Clint exactly the kind of regular strokes that would coax him over the edge time after time without leaving him too sore to sit the next day, and Clint's body was soaking it up.

"Wow, really? Already? That's incredible," Phil said. "I can't usually get more than one from my hole, not unless I'm willing to spend a long time working on it."

"I am—*ah*, yeah!—more than willing to take that on as a project," Clint said, resisting the urge to push back into Phil faster, try to speed him along. It was always better when he made himself wait. "If that's something you'd be into."

"Sounds like a good time," Phil said, a little breathless from the pace. "Something to do on the weekend."

"You're something to do on the weekend," Clint said, not really paying attention to his mouth when the other end of him was so much more interesting.

Phil chuckled, and reached up to stroke through the down at the base of Clint's wings. The movement shifted his angle a little, and Clint gave a startled, hoarse cry and came; he hadn't even realized he'd been that close, but it rolled over him in a gentle swell, and he felt Phil's hands and hips go still as Clint's body started clenching around him.

"Did you just—"

"Yeah," Clint said, pushing back with lazy little rolls of his pelvis. "Yeah, 'sgood, don't stop, I can go again, just keep right on—yeah, like that, you can go a little faster," and Phil was a sex genius or maybe had some kind of erotic mutant powers, because he started moving again, a little harder and faster to compensate for the fresh rush of slick that had come with Clint's orgasm. It felt perfect, so good, and Clint told Phil so in a stream-of-consciousness babble; he was in the groove, now, he'd found the zone, and as long as Phil didn't stop for very long Clint could keep riding his pleasure.

He wasn't entirely sure if he came again several times, or if it was more that Phil kept him skating the edge of climax and prolonged it when it came, but Clint had stopped talking for a while (though not stopped making noise) when Phil finally said his name in a desperate, pleading tone.

He lifted his head and craned it around to look at Phil over his shoulder again. "What is it, love?" His voice came out hoarse and croaky, his throat dried out from the deep scenting breaths Clint kept taking through his mouth.

"I—I need to come," Phil said. His hands were tight on Clint's sides, just under his wings, where he could still stimulate the sensitive parts without endangering any feathers. "I'm sorry, I can't—you just feel so good, I can't wait any longer, is it okay if I—"

"No, yeah, go for it," Clint said. "I'm sorry, I got kinda carried away—you take what you need, I want you to come in me again."

Phil made a soft, wavering sound at that, so Clint tried to expound on the theme.

"I'm already all open and wet for you, all full of your come. Give me another one, darlin', make a real mess a'me. You like that, right? When you pull out after using a hole and you see it all relaxed and sloppy so you know you were there?" It was a pretty safe guess, given how Phil had reacted to his hole earlier and the way double-As tended to get about marking. "You'll be able to see mine in a minute, see it and know it's all yours, you made your mate so full and wet and—"

"Clint, *fuck*," Phil said, his voice almost sharp, and then he broke his pace and shoved himself in, quick and hard, and Clint squeezed down as best he could until Phil shuddered all over with his climax, pumping into Clint with a low, half-voiced groan.

"There, that's it, there you go, give it to me," Clint murmured. "Fill me all up. I love it, Phil, I'm gonna smell like you for days, it's so good."

"Come here," Phil said, pulling Clint away from the side of the nest. They both sighed when Phil finally slipped out, his cock, now spent, slowly shrinking. "Let me hold you?"

Clint let himself be arranged, facing Phil as they reclined on their sides on a pile of cushions, Phil stroking lovingly over any part of Clint he could reach.

“Was that good?” he asked, between peppering tiny kisses over Clint’s face. “Did I—was that what you wanted?”

Clint reached over to touch Phil, his hole still rippling with aftershocks, aching sweetly as it clenched around nothing. He ran his fingers over Phil’s scent-spots, just to make him gasp with the feel of it; Phil’s scent had deepened, rich with the spice and musk of his arousal. Clint loved having it on his fingers.

“It was wonderful,” he said. “*You* were wonderful. God, no wonder there was practically a line to talk to you at the National Security and Public Safety Summit last year. Someone’s gonna put a hit out on me for mating you and taking you off the market.”

Phil looked smug. It was a good look on him, though of course, most looks were. “It’s me they’ll be jealous of,” he said. “For taking *you* off the market, before most of them ever got to know you were on it in the first place.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Clint said softly. “I want to make you happy too, to be with me. To be my mate.”

“Ever since I met you, the closer we became, the happier I was,” Phil said. “Being your friend was better than being your partner, and being flock with you was better than that, and courting you was better still. And we haven’t been mates for very long, but I’m pretty sure the trend will continue.” He traced over Clint’s lips, so of course Clint had to kiss his fingers.

“Aw, darlin’, same here,” Clint said. He wanted to wrap Phil up in blankets, or preen his wings for him long and luxurious, or wring still more pleasure from his body—he wanted to take the huge warm wonderful feeling in his chest and share it, make sure Phil was feeling every bit of it, right there with him. He let one of his hand stroke over Phil’s flank, down to his hip, then glancing just barely over his still-wet pubic down, the slit still swollen and wet and his cock not quite all the way back in yet. “Are you about done, or would you like more?” he asked. “Before, you said you like to come in your hole sometimes, I’d love to help you along with that.”

“Do you want to fuck me?” Phil looked down at Clint’s hand, pink along his cheekbones and the tips of his ears. “I mean, I’d like that very much. If you wanted. You could, ah, play a little first, if you liked. But it would be—I’d love to give you your last orgasm that way. Have you inside me like I’m inside you. I’ve, I’ve thought about it, sometimes.”

Oh *hey* now.

“That,” Clint said, “Sounds like a *phenomenally* good idea.”

“I thought so.” Phil smiled, that pleased, shy little half-smile that Clint wanted to make happen all the time from then on. He kissed it, because how *couldn’t* he, and then stayed there for a while, just trading easy kisses while he idly traced an arc over Phil’s hip to brush over his cheeks, then pressed between them to brush softly over Phil’s hole, see how ready he was.

Phil twitched at the touch, and a little slick leaked out to coat Clint's fingertips, which was honestly flattering as hell, given Phil's hormone mix.

"I've thought about you, too," Clint said, pressing and circling a little, trying to wake up the nerves around Phil's hole, encourage them to get ready for business. "So many ways. Wondered what you'd like, what you'd want. If you'd want to do *this*." He nudged in, just barely, enjoying the ripple of muscle around the tip of his finger.

Phil sighed, long and sweet, pushing back gently into the touch. "I don't do it all the time," he said. "Takes a while, you have to—mmm—have to take care with it. My A-factor's pretty dominant."

"You don't say," Clint teased, grinning at him before leaning down to nip his collarbone.

"You know what I mean," Phil said.

"Yeah, I get you. It's easier to just stick with your cock most of the time, yeah? Don't have to coax it, don't need extra lube, don't have to worry about how fast you're ready and if you're keeping someone waiting, you still can get two good ones off…"

"Pretty much," Phil said.

"Well I for one am flattered you'll let me give you this," Clint told him. "Makes it even more special, not that it needed the help. Like it's a treat."

"Everything we do together is a treat," Phil said, then paused, a tiny frown crossing his forehead. "Well, everything we do together recreationally."

Clint had to stop moving for a second to laugh at that, resting his head against Phil's shoulder, because A, Phil was right that sometimes their jobs took them to very unpleasant places, and B, it was so like Phil to stop in the middle of his pillow talk to make his sweet nothings more accurate, and it was adorable, and Clint loved it.

"I mean," Phil said, sounding a little worried, "I love working with you, obviously, but sometimes the actual missions are…"

"No, no, I know," Clint said, little giggles still escaping between the words. "Totally. I was just, y'know, remembering that time we fell in the sewer in Guadalajara. And thinking how much I love you."

"Oh," Phil said. He smiled again, that radiant, half-disbelieving thing, and Clint had to lean back up to kiss it before resuming his attentions to Phil's hole.

"Do you have some lube?" he asked. "And, ah, also, if you wanted, I could use some of mine. Fine if you're not into that, but it can help you along." Even mixed with Phil's come the way it was—the thought sent a zing of fresh arousal tingling along his nerves—Clint's slick would be rich with Clint's needy pheromones and the o-factor hormones that would encourage Phil's body to open up and get wetter. Plus, well, any opportunity to slather Phil in more of

Clint's mate-scent was a good one in Clint's books. But he knew some people found it kind of gross.

"Lube's here," Phil said, opening a cabinet in the side of the nest and tossing Clint a pump bottle, "but you first? Yours, I mean, I want you to open me up with your own slick." He blushed, a wave of deep pink spreading over his skin from crestline to chest, but his eyes were blown dark and his voice was intent. "Please, see how far that gets me, then we can top off with the other stuff?"

"Absolutely we can do that," Clint said. He tucked the lube bottle next to him so he'd have it to hand when needed. "Here, just—" he pulled his hand away from Phil's hole, and Phil made a noise of protest. "Sorry, hang on, just a second," Clint promised. He twisted around to reach his own hole, which was still hot and swollen with use, deliciously sensitive and still loose enough that he could reach right in and coat his fingers, making himself jolt a little with the stimulation, almost another aftershock of orgasm. He groaned. "I'm still so open," he told Phil. "You could get your hand in me right now if you wanted, or a big toy, keep me ready and do it all again later."

Phil sucked in a sharp breath. "Fuck, yeah," he said. "We could go shopping together, pick some things out, go DND for a couple days and spend the whole time naked."

Clint smeared the slick over Phil's hole, rubbing it into the soft skin with swirling, massaging strokes of his fingers. "I like the way you think," he said. "Here, how's this?"

"It's good," Phil said, pushing back a little into the pressure. "Keep going."

Clint went back to his own hole for more slick. He got his index finger thickly covered and pressed gently at Phil's opening, pushing in through the snug flex of him and rotating his finger, trying to make sure the slick got everywhere. Phil groaned, squeezing down around Clint's finger with as much enjoyment as if it were his cock.

"Yeah, just like that," he said. "Keep going just like that. I can feel it starting to work, I think. It's warm. Feels so good."

Clint tugged a little, then nodded, nosing in closer to Phil so he could lick at his scent-spot again. "Yeah, you're starting to loosen up good, sweetheart," he said. "Here, two fingers now." He was still leaking fresh slick, himself, his whole body cranked up with how much he wanted Phil, how good it had already been. He was keeping his hips tilted away from Phil, just in case; the continuing stimulation he was giving his hole was keeping his cock from getting ahead of itself, but he'd been hard for a long time, and he knew as soon as he felt Phil's silky heat around him it would be a challenge to hold off coming long enough to give Phil the ride he deserved.

He worked Phil's hole patiently, alternating between his own body and Phil's until he was taking four of Clint's fingers easily, pushing back into each little thrust and making half-voiced, throaty noises that made Clint shiver with want. Phil would never get as wet as Clint did, but he was still plenty wet for their purposes. Clint angled his hand so that his knuckles would catch Phil's entrance as they slid through it; Phil cried out, a near-yelp that melted into a low, satisfied groan.

“So good,” he said, his hands clutching at Clint’s sides, trying to pull them closer together. “I, I think I could come like this.”

Clint felt himself grinning like a shark, the thought of making Phil fall apart on his fingers lighting him up like a firework. “Yeah? Let’s do it, you need it faster?”

“Faster, yeah,” Phil panted. “Angle up a little—*yeah,* that, right there!”

Clint spared a second to be thankful that his normal work resulted in really good hand strength and dexterity, and then gave Phil what he wanted, a sharp angle and a fast pace; he could feel his fingertips brushing past a slight swell behind the back wall of Phil’s passage, one of the glands that felt good when you stimulated it. Phil tensed up, bracing himself so that none of the force of Clint’s hands was moving Phil, and then tensed up impossibly more, his breathing going fast, making little high-pitched almost-whines on each exhale.

“Almost there, aren’t you, darlin,” Clint murmured, kissing anything he could reach. “Can feel you reaching for it, we’ll get you there. Just let yourself have it, Phil, that’s my hand you’re about to come on, I’ve got four fingers up inside your sweet hole, getting you ready for my cock. I’m gonna stuff you full’a me while your come’s still dripping out my hole—”

Phil arched his back, his wings snapping out to full extension, and came, his body clenching tight; Clint could feel a new trickle of wetness on his fingers as the orgasm encouraged Phil’s hole to ready itself further.

“There, there you go, just like that, love, you’re so beautiful like that, I love to see you coming for me.” He stroked over Phil’s skin and as much of his wings as he could reach with his other hand, gentling the shivers of aftershock. “That’s it, that’s it, perfect.” He stilled his hand, just letting his fingers rest inside Phil until he’d stopped shaking and opened his eyes.

“Hey there,” Clint said, feeling so warm and soft and happy he almost didn’t care if he came again as long as Phil kept looking like that. “You still wanna—”

“Sit on your cock? Yes, please, right now,” Phil said. His eyes were a little wild, his crest damp with sweat, scent-spots actually a little shiny with the amount of mate-scent he was pumping out.

“I’m all in favor of that,” Clint said. He grabbed the lube with the hand that wasn’t still in Phil’s hole. “Hold out your hand,” he said, and gave Phil’s fingers a couple pumps. “Okay, now hold my place,” he said, less because he thought Phil would close up again that fast and more because he wanted to see it. Phil swallowed hard and nodded, and when Clint slid his fingers out, Phil put his own in their place.

It was just as awesome a sight as Clint had thought it would be.

Clint rolled up onto his knees and gathered up the scattered pillows. He had an idea for how to do this. Once he had everything settled and the lube to hand, he propped himself up against one stack of pillows with his wings spread out beneath him, and slung his knees over a smaller pillow pile, making his body into a comfortable angle. He held out his hand to Phil, who was watching with a bright, hungry expression. “Straddle me?”

Phil took Clint's hand, then pulled his fingers out of his hole and knelt up over Clint's midsection, his wings flaring as he looked down into Clint's face. "How do you want me?"

Clint spread a pump of lube over his cock—it had been out long enough for the slick to go a little tacky—and took hold of it, careful not to stimulate himself too much. He angled himself at the proper trajectory (he was great at trajectories, no matter what form they took) and rested his other hand on Phil's thigh. "Sit down on me?" He asked. "But not too fast, I don't want this to be over too soon."

Phil nodded, that determined set to his jaw again, and lowered himself slowly, one hand going to the edge of the nest for balance. When Clint felt the soft, wet opening of Phil's body on the tip of his cock, he had to lock all his muscles for a moment to keep himself from driving in the rest of the way; it was a near thing, but he managed. He was rewarding by the feeling of that tender grip moving slow and steady down his length, each centimeter a revelation, until Phil was all the way down, cradled in the angle of Clint's body and surrounding him.

"Fuck that's good," Clint said, breathless. "Stay, stay still for a little? I just, I need to get used to this."

Clint couldn't remember ever being inside someone after his cock had been out for so long beforehand. It made everything different; he'd dried out a little, so the slick inside Phil felt even more sumptuous. He'd gotten used to the cool air, so Phil's body felt even hotter. He'd been paying more attention to his own hole, so it was still twitching some, even while his cock got harder. Someday soon, Clint was going to do this again, just like this (assuming Phil liked it), but with a nice fat plug inside, so that Phil's weight would press him down onto it with each thrust, like they were that snake thing that eats its own tail, except for with fucking.

When he thought he could do it without just coming right then, he tugged gently on Phil's shoulder. "Can you lean forward? Rest on my chest, so I can hold you?"

"It won't be too much weight on your wings?"

"I'm on a bunch of pillows, they'll be fine." Clint reached up, and Phil came to him, both of them sighing as Clint's cock shifted inside Phil. Phil kept his knees bent but rested his upper body against Clint's, the angle he was propped at making it comfortable, and Clint wrapped his arms around Phil's waist, underneath his wings, and held him close while Phil nestled his head on Clint's shoulder, pressing long kisses to Clint's scent-spot.

"I want to move," Phil whispered against his throat. "But I also want to stay here forever."

"I know what you mean," Clint said. He felt so good, in his cock and his hole, in his body. He felt so good in his head, now. In his heart. He loved and he was loved and they were loving each other together and Phil's nest was the best place on the literal entire Earth that night, and probably also in space.

Definitely it was better than a space station. Based on a visit that Clint had absolutely never made.

“D’you think you can come again?” Clint murmured into the soft, sleek feathers above Phil’s ear. “Can I give you another, before I finish off?”

Phil squeezed down around him experimentally, and they both groaned a little. It felt amazing; even after you stretched them out, double-As stayed pretty tight. “I think so?” he said. “I don’t usually, but tonight’s been… inspiring.”

Clint hummed an agreeing noise, skritching the down at the base of Phil’s wings and then tracing down his spine and then lower still, feeling the place Phil was stretched out around him. “Then move at your own pace, darlin’, and I’ll try to hold out for you as long as I can,” he promised.

Phil moved his hips a little, barely enough to move Clint’s cock out an inch and then back in again. “Even if I don’t come, it still feels incredible,” he said, his voice dreamy, a little muffled against Clint’s neck. “Better than any fantasy I ever had. I’m so glad you accepted my suit.” He kept moving while he spoke, gentle rolls of motion like waves at low tide, slick and easy.

Clint kept his hands moving over Phil’s back and his wings, seeking out the places that coaxed happy little rumbles out of him, vibrating where their chests were pressed together. “Accepted it soon as I realized you were offering,” he said. “Felt kind of silly I didn’t think of it before, you were already so special to me.”

Phil licked across Clint’s scent-spot again. “Sometimes the closer we are to something, the harder it is to see how it could be different,” he said. “Especially when it’s already good.”

Clint squeezed him a little more. “Yeah,” he said. “Still. Thank you for hangin’ in there with me until I figured things out. Losing out on this, on *you*, it would’ve been… I can’t even imagine.”

“You don’t have to imagine.” Phil squeezed down hard around Clint’s cock, as though to emphasize exactly *where* Clint was; he didn’t exactly yelp, but he didn’t exactly not, either. “You’re here now.”

“I’ll be *here* anytime you want,” Clint retorted, thrusting up a little to meet Phil’s next downward motion. Like that had shifted them into a different gear, Phil started moving faster; after a few strokes, he left a long, sucking kiss on Clint’s throat and sat up to give himself more leverage.

“You can move, if you want,” he said, so Clint started thrusting up to meet him, bracing his feet and shoulders and powering his hips up to meet each of Phil’s downstrokes. It felt—Clint was running out of synonyms for “totally fucking awesome” to explain how it felt. It felt *so* good, the best sex ever, but with Phil, his *mate* Phil, so it was even better than that. Clint suspected that they could have been having objectively bad sex and it still would have been the best, because it was their mating night; it was their first time, and they were mates now, and everything felt like honey and fire and smelled like love and home and always.

He could feel the orgasm coiling up inside, and squeezed Phil’s hips in warning. “Can’t hold out much longer,” he said, his voice coming out jerky from the impact of their motion.

“Anything I can do for you?”

“If you could—” Phil paused and leaned back a little, his wings brushing Clint’s upraised knees. He picked up Clint’s hand and laid it on his pubic mound; he wasn’t getting hard again, not so soon, but he wasn’t completely soft either; Clint could feel the swell of him plumping up inside a little, the lips of his slit still puffy and wet beneath the down. “Inside? Just, just a little, it’s really sensitive but I think that’ll put me over.”

Clint took a deep, shuddery breath, nodding about twelve times because fuck *yes* he wanted to do that, and when Phil started moving again, slower but more forceful, he ran his fingertip back between Phil’s legs enough to collect some slick and then stroked over his slit from bottom to top. He pushed just a little harder each time, until the lips parted around him and he was *inside*, he was inside both sides of Phil at once; the sheer filthy joy of it made his toes curl into the sheets. He let Phil’s movements do most of the work; he knew from experience how sensitive Phil’s slit would be, how the lightest contact could be nearly too much. He pressed in a little more, watching Phil’s face in case his straining pleasure turned to a wince, and then a little more still. His finger brushed over Phil’s cock where it lay tucked away inside him, and Phil shouted with it, his face and body gone tight. Clint started to pull back, but Phil grabbed his hand and held it where it was, grinding back and forth between Clint’s cock and his finger, making helpless-sounding noises; he was nearly there, Clint could tell, trembling all over and straining for it. Clint started babbling nonsense, Phil’s name and pet names and half-spoken words, and then suddenly he was going to come; he couldn’t hold it back, it was going to hit him like a freight train. Determined to bring Phil along, he thrust up hard with his hips and pushed in firm with his finger and rubbed.

Phil spasmed around him, crying out something formless and full of vowels. Clint felt like his whole body clenched as he finally let go his control and pumped into Phil, concentrating so hard on how good it felt that he forgot to breathe.

They both sort of collapsed at the same time, wings and limbs all tangling together in a heap, both of them trying to kiss and breathe at the same time. Clint kept laughing, little chuckles like bubbles of joy bursting, and his eyes smarted with tears at the same time, like he had so much emotion he’d overflowed his buffers and it was coming out all over anyhow.

“Phil,” he managed. “That was. You. Yes.”

Phil raised his head enough to make eye contact. There was a streak of Clint’s scent across his cheek, shining wetly where the light hit. His crest was all over the place, and he was actually mantling his wings over them like he needed to shield them from something. He was so beautiful.

“You too,” he said, and seemed to be looking for words for a bit, before he shrugged and bent back down to kiss Clint some more, the motion letting Clint’s cock slip out of his body.

As the rush of coming ebbed, Clint could feel sleep looming; his eyes and limbs were getting heavier, his thoughts smearing into a golden haze. His body, sated at last, almost drunk on mate-scent and happiness, was rolling down the shades and taking in the mats.

“Phil,” he mumbled, plucking clumsily at Phil’s arm. “Sleep.”

“Sleep if you want to, darling,” Phil said, sounding drowsy and blissed-out where he was curled up on Clint’s chest.

“Wet,” Clint protested, vaguely aware of the concepts of wet spots and, like, towels, but completely unable to muster the energy to actually do anything about it.

“I’ll take care of things,” Phil said. “Sleep now.”

“‘Kay,” Clint managed, and as he gave into slumber he was distantly aware of the rustle of warm wings settling down over them both.

On the Function of Oxytocin in Homo Avis

Chapter Summary

> Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
> This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere.

Chapter Notes

> And here we are, at the end at last.
>
> This story could not have been written if not for the enthusiasm and support of my darling flock, the Order of St. Wilfrid, and especially for the amazing beta work by Kathar.
>
> Thank you all for coming along.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Consciousness crept in softly, starting with a distant awareness of warmth and safety, and detouring around a half-dreamed rustle of wings and a soft reassuring murmur before cuddling back into the nest for an indefinite time. When Clint's brain actually engaged at last, he noticed several things in rapid succession: a hand smoothing gently over his feathers, a lungful of mate-scent so strong it would have been kind of disgusting if it hadn't been his and Phil's mate-scent and therefore intoxicating and perfect, and a feeling of general happiness so immense that he felt like he might actually be glowing, just a little.

"Phil," he mumbled into the pillow his face was currently mashed up against, and the hand paused before resuming its caresses, a little firmer and more intent.

"Good morning, love," Phil said, with a tone that—Clint wanted to eat it, or wear it, or something; to roll all up inside it and live there. He turned his head toward Phil's voice and squinted into the light.

"Morning," he said, grinning up at Phil like a dope. He was happy to see that even if Phil had woken up first, he hadn't gotten dressed yet. They'd just mated, after all, and what was the point of taking a long weekend for your mating if you didn't spend most of it in the nest, preferably without clothes?

And doing lots of clothes-free activities.

Clint stretched, then winced slightly; he was maybe stuck to something a little and what felt like every muscle between armpits and knees was making itself known.

“You all right, sweetheart?”

Clint had apparently rolled onto his belly in the night, diagonally across the nest with his wings splayed carelessly; Phil was sitting up beside him, one of Clint’s wings pulled across his lap as he gently preened the feathers. Clint propped himself up on his elbows and leaned up to brush a kiss on Phil’s arm, which was as high as he could reach just then.

“I’m great,” he said. “Stiffened up a little; we worked some muscles I’d forgotten I had. Plus I think I might be stuck to your sheets.”

Phil smirked at him, and Clint had to wriggle around a bit until he could strain up to kiss the smug right off his lips. “Yeah, my mate’s a sex god,” he said, when he came up for air. “I admit it freely; I have impeccable taste.” He winked—he was pretty sure mates was the *only* area in which he had impeccable taste, except maybe archery equipment—but Phil just chuckled, low and rumbly in his chest in a way that Clint wanted to hear every day from then on.

“Do you have any impeccable taste for breakfast in the nest?” he asked. “I’ve got some, if you’re hungry.”

As if Phil’s words had summoned it, Clint suddenly realized that he *was* hungry; his stomach gurgled, as though to emphasize the point.

“Starving,” he said. “Especially if whatever you have doesn’t require us to put clothes on before we eat it.”

Phil smiled. “Completely clothing-optional. You don’t even have to sit up if you don’t want to. I could even feed you again.” He glanced down at where his hands were buried in Clint’s feathers, his cheekbones going a bit pink. “I mean, not formally like before. Just, if you wanted me to.”

“Do you want to?” Clint nudged Phil’s thigh. “Cause we could totally do that if you wanted to. I have no objection to just lying back and being spoiled for a while.”

“If you’d like it,” Phil said, and he was full-out blushing now, which Clint filed away under *very very interesting, remember to investigate further*.

“Then let’s do it,” Clint declared. “You get the stuff, I’ll sit up or something so I’m less likely to make a mess.” He sat up, and the skin of his belly peeled away from the sheets he was lying on. Clint yelped when it pulled away from his down, leaving a few tiny feathers stuck to the sheet.

“Ow,” he said, making a face. “Sorry, shoulda cleaned up last night, but I passed out hard.” He glanced over at Phil, who was looking concerned. “S’not a bad thing, hon,” he reassured him. “You rocked my world.”

Phil smiled, the creases in his forehead smoothing. “Well, next time I’ll rouse you enough to wipe down before we sleep,” he said. “But, here, before we eat, can I straighten up the nest a little?”

Clint agreed, and helped Phil strip off the soiled sheets; he was still hormonal enough that he liked the smell, but they’d be pretty rank once they finished coming down off the mating high, plus they were stiff and sticky. He’d thought that they would have to remake it afterward, but it turned out that Phil had thought of everything; the sheets had a thin waterproof cover beneath them, and under that was another, fresh set of sheets. The duvet was similarly treated, so that all they had to do was take off the dirty bedding and chuck it over the side of the nest to deal with later.

“Tell me honestly,” Clint said, trying to keep a straight face. “How many layers of sheets do you have on this thing?”

Phil laughed, looking a little sheepish. “Just the two,” he said. “I thought, well, if you stayed over I wanted to be prepared for anything.”

“A plus, Agent,” Clint teased. “Significantly exceeds expectations, as always. So, food?”

“Why don’t you come sit over here,” Phil said, gesturing. “There’s a tray where we can put everything. Be right back.”

Clint stretched, extending arms up and wings out and enjoying the feeling of loosening up his muscles a little, the twinges of soreness transmuting into a warm ache that was actually pretty sexy when he really thought about it and remembered why it was there. By the time Phil came back, carrying an actual, literal wicker picnic basket, Clint had found a comfortable spot to lounge, and had arranged himself artistically across a pile of pillows. Phil’s eyes went gratifyingly wide when he saw him. He hastened to settle down next to Clint, his wings fanning out over the nest like a pool of spilled ink. He set the basket down beside his hip and pulled down a tray that was built into the side of the nest; it was a good height to use as a snack table, or to prop a laptop or a notebook on.

“Before we eat, I wondered if you’d like to clean up a little?” Phil pulled a plastic container out of the basket—wipes or something, Clint supposed—and nodded at the flaking mess on Clint’s…well, pretty much Clint’s everywhere between his navel and mid-thigh.

“Yeah, probably a good idea. Here.” Clint held out his hand, and Phil paused, looking a little reluctant.

“I’d like to do it for you,” he said, looking really unnecessarily shy about it, considering he’d been there the whole time the mess was getting made.

“Clean up after yourself, you mean? Sure, knock yourself out.” Clint used the reaching hand to make a sweeping gesture over his body, then settled back into his comfy pillow mountain.

“Thanks.” Phil opened the container, and Clint realized it wasn’t commercial wipes at all, but warm, damp cloths. Phil wiped him down gently, careful and tender; he began at the edges and worked his way inward, cleaning a spot and then patting it dry with a fluffy hand towel

he'd produced from somewhere. Eventually, he'd done everything he could reach, so Clint arched his back and parted his legs, baring himself to Phil, slit and hole and inner thighs.

"You're so beautiful," Phil said quietly, looking up into Clint's face with his own expression serious but somehow full of light, a look that made Clint's heart turn over with love. Clint cupped his jaw, his fingertips resting on his scent-spot, and rubbed his thumb gently over Phil's lips.

"We're beautiful," he said. "Together. This was a great idea; gold star, us."

Phil laughed and resumed his attentions, his strokes gentling as he moved to the most sensitive places. It was turning Clint on, a little, but Phil wasn't trying to arouse him, so it was more of a happy little undercurrent to the whole thing.

When Clint was clean—or at least as clean as he would be until he had a proper shower—Phil put the washcloths and towel away and started pulling food out of the basket, setting it up on the tray.

"It's mainly things that would be easy to eat in the nest," he said. "I didn't really want to cook again this morning, so I hope you don't mind something of a continental breakfast approach."

"Not at all," Clint said. "I'm not really ready to get up, yet. It's nice in here. Got soft stuff to nest in, plenty of space, my super-hot mate…" He poked Phil gently in the side, just teasing. He received a wide, happy grin in return, the one Clint loved that turned a little shy at the edges, Phil dipping his head and looking up at Clint through his lashes like he was checking to make sure Clint was still there.

When Clint thought "continental breakfast" he tended to think of, like, a vending-machine danish and some bad coffee, but Phil had gone all out in what Clint was coming to realize must be his trademark style, at least where mating was concerned. The basket had eventually disgorged an assortment of pastries covered in seeds and nuts, a bowl of gorgeous, jewel-like berries and another of honey whipped cream, two big insulated travel mugs of Clint's favorite coffee, and a bunch of tiny, finger-sized wheels of brie cheese, as well as several big cloth napkins that helped contain the potential spread of crumbs in the nest.

Clint ended up drinking his coffee and eating his pastries himself—it was hard enough to eat some stuff without making a mess when the hand and mouth involved were driven by the *same* brain—but also spent a fair amount of breakfast lounging with as much of his skin in contact with Phil's as possible, letting Phil feed him bites of cheese and fruit dredged through the whipped cream. He occasionally returned the favor, just to enjoy the way it made Phil's short crest ruffle and his wings stir; he didn't know how he'd ever thought that Phil didn't get cresty. He totally did, you just had to know where to look.

Fortunately, this was nothing of a hardship.

When the provisions had been exhausted and the remainders bundled up in the basket and put outside the nest to be dealt with later, they rolled themselves back up in a tangle of wings and limbs and just dozed for a while, idly touching with no real intent except to bask in closeness and enjoy the warm, private, them-smelling nest.

You were supposed to do this, after mating; it encouraged your hormones to start settling down into a state fit for public consumption, so you weren't just blasting everyone in your vicinity with mate-scent and smugness. Clint privately thought he'd likely always go at least a little Yankee Candle around Phil, but it was important to get a handle on these things, now that most people weren't able to take weeks off to nest after they mated.

Phil nuzzled at Clint's scent-spot, and Clint sighed happily. It felt so good. Ordinarily, he'd be starting to get wet already from it, but he'd been well and truly sated not that long ago and was currently sleepy and digesting, so it just felt intimate, the connection curling syrupy-sweet through his body like Phil was somehow banking *love* directly into Clint's heart.

Look, mating hormones were really potent, okay.

"We should probably get up at some point," Phil said, though he didn't sound at all like he actually wanted to.

"Ehhh," Clint said, shifting his grip on Phil so that he could stroke through the down at the base of his wings. "Why, you got somewhere else to be today?"

"You know I don't." Phil pushed into Clint's hands, a happy little rumble in his throat. "That feels great."

Clint kept going, throwing in a little massage to the wing muscles that always liked to get sore. "Then I'm good here for a while. I think I might nap some more. And at some point I'd love to get my mouth on your hole, I never got a chance last night. I mean, if you want."

Phil shivered in his arms. "I want," he said. "I mean. Not right now. But in a while."

"Mmm." Clint kissed him, long and unhurried and tender, like he could push all his giant engulfing joy into Phil's body through his lips. "Yeah. No rush, love. We got time."

Maybe Clint *was* the pickiest omega in SHIELD. That was fine.

It just meant he'd held out for the best.

>>-----> <-----<<

LATER THAT YEAR

Holidays at Barney and Laura's farm were always a little chaotic, but Clint had grown up in environments where chaos was something of a default assumption, so it never seemed particularly unusual to him. He'd forgotten that Phil had been an only chick, and had moved directly from school to the SHIELD Academy—until he'd looked over from the middle of the squealing mass of wings and chatter that was how Barney's brood always greeted his visits, and saw Phil frozen on the spot, eyes huge, looking like he had no idea how to deal with his current circumstances.

Fortunately, Barney had understood Clint's desperate facial signals over Lila's shoulder and gone over with a warm "And you must be Phil!" and a handshake, snapping Phil visibly into meeting-VIPs mode.

Clint tried to ease Phil into things more gradually after that, and by the time they got to Christmas Day he'd made friends with Laura (whose unflappability in the face of Bartons seemed to inspire some fellow-feeling) and Barney (who, Clint suspected, smelled and looked and sounded enough like Clint himself to trigger some sort of "family" association in Phil's subconscious, and who was happy to talk FBI shop besides.)

Phil had also made admirable efforts towards the chicks, though as it turned out Phil had practically no experience with young that didn't involve rescuing them from some sort of crisis and handing them over to social workers or doctors or concerned parents as soon as possible thereafter. He'd eventually defaulted to treating the older two more or less like foreign dignitaries from somewhere with very different cultural norms. Naturally, they adored being the focus of Phil's respectful attention, and "Uncle Phil" was seldom without a small shadow or two, tagging along behind him, reaching up to hold his hand (which he always permitted, albeit stiffly and with a good deal of surreptitious hand washing afterward) and chattering his ear off about Pokemons or Power Rangers or dinosaurs while Phil nodded, his face looking like he could just as well be negotiating a tricky cease-fire agreement between three parties, two of which did not, technically speaking, exist.

He still hadn't figured out how to handle the hatchling, though, since Nate was still in the "adorable lump" stage of development.

Late on Christmas afternoon, everyone was in a lazy mood, the early-morning excitement of presents having subsided into a post-dinner lull. Cooper and Lila were playing with their new toys, Laura was reading, and Phil and Barney were discussing some kind of new cross-jurisdictional task force that had been proposed. Clint didn't begrudge the work talk—he was happy to see his mate and his brother connecting about something, and they honestly didn't have much in common besides national security and Clint himself—but he got plenty of that at work, so he volunteered to do tummy time with Nate, who was still little enough that peek-a-boo was essentially mind-blowing magic. He giggled and squealed whenever Clint's face reappeared from behind his hands, kicking his little feet and flailing his tiny, downy wings in delight. Eventually he got tired and fussy; Clint gathered him up against his chest, folding his wings up against his back and holding him up so he could rest his head on Clint's shoulder, close enough to his neck to scent the *family* on him.

"There you go, buddy," he said as Nate calmed, falling instinctively into the gentle, cooing voice that all Barney's chicks had responded to at that age. "There you go, you're all good, everything's fine." He got to his feet, then looked up to see Phil and Barney watching him; Barney had his "family's all here, all's right with the world" look on, while Phil's expression was a bit harder to parse, though Clint was pretty sure it was good.

"Hey, Phil, you wanna hold him?" Clint asked, only a little bit because seeing Phil with a hatchling would probably be both funny and adorable. "He'll probably fall asleep on you, I think I wore him out."

"I, ah… are you sure? I don't really have any experience with hatchlings."

“They’re easy at this age,” Barney reassured him. “Clint’s right, he just needs a little quiet and he’ll probably go right to sleep.”

“All right, then,” Phil said, holding out his arms with an expression probably more appropriate to being handed a live grenade than a sleepy infant, and letting Clint transfer Nate carefully into them. Nate wiggled a little, then scented Phil a few times before nestling into his shoulder with a little sigh and shoving most of his fingers into his mouth before settling down.

“There you go,” Clint said softly. “He’s already getting blinky, just hold him there and he’ll drop right off.”

Phil nodded, looking determined.

“Hey, Clint, can I borrow you for a minute?” Barney asked. “Phil, it shouldn’t take long, just call if you need anything.”

“No problem,” Phil said, then shot an alarmed look at Nate, who fortunately didn’t look disturbed.

“Sure thing, Barn.” Clint followed his brother into the kitchen. “What’s up?”

“Just thought you might like a good angle to take a picture,” Barney said, nodding at the way that Phil and Nate were perfectly framed by the doorway.

“They *are* adorable,” Clint agreed, pulling out his phone for a few snaps. Natasha would definitely appreciate the look on Phil’s face, like he was handling live ordinance but also the live ordinance was really cute. Nate’s down was pale gold, a fuzzy halo all around his head and wings, and combined with Phil’s dramatically dark feathers and blue shirt, they looked a little like models cast for some kind of ad campaign. “Nate settled right in, I think he likes how calm Phil can be.”

“Well, that, and he smells like family,” Barney said.

Clint turned to him, startled. “He what now?”

Barney scratched his red-brown crest. “Are you kidding me? Clint, you guys smell half-bonded already, don’t tell me you haven’t noticed.”

Clint’s face heated. “I mean. I know we smell like each other, but—that’s the mate-scent, I thought. From, you know.” He made a vague gesture that he stopped, at the last minute, from turning into something inappropriate for children. They hadn’t quite nested up yet, but they spent most of their downtime together at one of their bowers or the other, and their sex life continued to be spectacular, if Clint did say so himself. Clint had taken to using Phil’s Nothing To See Here, Move Along scent-blocking stuff for work, just to keep from knocking people over with pheromones every time Phil smiled at him.

Barney chuckled. “Nah, mate-scent’s superficial,” he said. “It’s, you know, *on* someone, not *from* them. You two’ve started putting out a bond-scent. Honestly, if I hadn’t already liked

him for how happy you've sounded since you two started courting, I would have started once I got a whiff of you. You must be really well matched to be synced up that much so soon after you mated."

"Oh," Clint said. His throat felt tight. He looked over at Phil, dark head bowed over Nate's bright one, and thought of how Nate had snuffled at Phil's smell and then settled, just like he did for Clint. His eyes stung, suddenly; he and Bobbi had been together for years, and they'd never bonded, never even a little, and Clint had always been secretly worried that it was his fault, somehow. That some combination of early childhood trauma and nontraditional upbringing and Clint's inherent… *whatever* had stunted Clint's ability to bond properly, and he'd never be able to get that close to someone, never build a connection that intimate. He'd mostly managed not to think about it lately; he and Phil were happy, regardless of how attuned their biochemistry was, and he'd decided he was going to be fine with that.

He'd honestly mostly convinced himself, so it was kind of shocking to realize how relieved he felt that the problem in his former relationship had been a *them* thing and not a *him* thing.

"I… wow," he said softly, blinking a few tears away. "I didn't realize. I—thanks." He sniffed. "That's good. That's really good."

"C'mere." Barney pulled him into a hug, the same solid squeeze that he'd always had, his scent as always big and warm and welcoming, feeling like acceptance and protection and family. "You deserve it. We're happy for you."

They stood there for a long moment, then Barney sighed. "So, now I need a reason I needed help," he said. "What d'you say, cookies and cocoa?"

"Sounds like a plan," Clint agreed, swiping his eyes on a dishtowel, and they pulled together part of the Christmas cookie stash and made mugs of cocoa. When they were done, Barney quietly collected the older two, and Clint went to help Phil with Advanced Hatchling Napping, aka how to put the chick down in his nest without waking him up. Once they'd successfully transferred Nate, turned on the monitor, and tiptoed out of the room, Clint took Phil's hand and tugged him into an embrace, putting his face right up close to Phil's jaw for a good scenting breath, just to see.

Phil smelled like their nest at home, a spicy-sweet twining of their scents, but this time it couldn't just be from the physical acts of mating; they hadn't, since they'd gotten to the farm. They both had kind of a thing about doing that in someone else's nest.

"Hey, Phil?" Clint didn't look up; it felt… too much, somehow, too exposed. Too important. "Do you think maybe… Barney says we smell like we're bonding."

Phil startled, just a little bit, his wings rustling. "Does he?" He turned his head and scented Clint, his arms tightening around Clint's waist. First a short breath, then several longer ones, open-mouthed. "I'll be damned," he said, and the tone of his voice made Clint look up at him; he was practically glowing, radiant in the dim hall, looking excited and triumphant and just a bit smug. "I think we are."

Clint grinned back at him, the little knot of trepidation that hadn't had any good reason to exist anyway loosening and slipping away at Phil's obvious gladness. "Guess this means you're stuck with me," he said.

"'Stuck' implies that this wasn't what I wanted all along," Phil said. "This means I get to *keep* you. I mean…" he bit his lip, uncertainty crossing his face. "Doesn't it?"

"Oh, sweetheart," Clint said. He felt like he was going to melt, just dissolve into a puddle like a marshmallow in a cup of cocoa. He felt like he could leave the earth and fly around with no help from his wings, just powered on sheer happiness. He felt like he'd won a prize, like, a Nobel Prize or the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes, something far out of proportion to what he deserved. "Of *course* it does. Of course."

Eventually, Barney sent Lila to see what was taking them so long. Clint was distantly aware of the sound of her footsteps coming down the hall, pausing, then going back, and her high-pitched voice announcing, "they're kissing in the hall, Daddy. Can Coop an' me have their cookies?"

He laughed against Phil's mouth, and Phil gave him a squeeze in response, pulling apart reluctantly to rest their foreheads together. The air between their faces was warm and full of their blended scents. Clint thought about the years in front of them, a lifetime coming to fill with missions and mating and flock, with Dog Cops marathons and preening, with comfort and love and belonging and home.

Let the chicks have his cookies, he thought. He had all the sweetness he needed.

Chapter End Notes

Would anyone be interested if I posted a chapter or sequel or something compiling all the meta about the bird-people's anatomy/fashion/culture/etc?

Bonus: All The Meta!

Chapter Summary

Worldbuilding notes and meta for the "Love of a Particular Kind" universe. Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

As requested, here is a compilation of the worldbuilding meta I developed while writing this story. Please feel free to use this information to write your own stories in this universe!

Many people expressed interest in reading more of the world building and meta I developed for *Love of a Particular Kind*. I'm posting this so that people who are curious or who are interested in writing their own story in the humavian universe can see all the stuff that my deeply strange search history has given me!

Please remember that this isn't betaed and is only lightly edited because it's world-building notes! Additionally, some parts aren't fully developed because I didn't need to know them while writing the story.

Thanks so much to everyone for all your interest!

General Appearance

Homo avis (aka "birdmen" or "humavians") look a lot like the "human with wings" that we see in a lot of fantasy art (or religious art, if you're talking angels), with a few exceptions:

• They are overall smaller (both in height and in build)

• They have feathers everywhere that humans have hair (at different densities, similar to human body vs head hair)

• Their sexual characteristics are different from humans (most notably from a distance, they don't have external genitalia or breasts)

• Their feathers have a similar range of color and markings that birds do - a wider range than human hair color

• Their wingspan, outstretched, is about twice their height.

Crests

Crests are roughly analogous to human hair. For characters you know, unless otherwise specified, assume the feathers grow in a shape that is similar in general appearance to their canon hairstyle. The crest feathers stand erect for threat and/or mating displays, and in general during any arousal state (sexual or otherwise.)

Biology

Homo avis shares a common ancestor with modern birds and reptiles, and thus has some features in common with each. The reptilian influence is most obvious in their reproductive biology, while the bird is most obvious in the wings/feathers/mating behaviors.

Wings

The anatomy of the wings is by necessity somewhat fantastical, because all the winged animals in real life that I am aware of basically have wings instead of arms, while the bird-people have both. While they look essentially like "a human with wings" from a distance, their internal anatomy would need to be quite different.

In order for them to have both wings and arms, I theorize that they have some kind of ball-and-socket joint (like a hip or shoulder joint) located on either side of the spine. I think the base of the wings runs from around the T3-T4 vertebrae to around T12. They likely have several additional bones that form the joint, possibly including a second shoulder blade or a larger, segmented shoulder blade, as well as the bones of the wings themselves. This second and/or larger shoulder blade glides over the ribcage when the wings are moved, providing a flexible anchor to provide a balance between stability and mobility. There are also bony plates in the front that partially cover the ribs, providing stiffening to the ribcage so that it does not compress when the wing is moved forward. They have a longer breastbone than humans with a slight keeled structure where the large chest muscles that move the wings attach. Unlike birds, their collarbones are not fused, as they need that mobility for their arms.

They probably have a series of very strong ligaments that connect the wings to the ribs, pelvis, and shoulders - almost like a parachute harness - to help spread the weight appropriately when the wings are in use. There is probably also some sort of ligament/muscle arrangement involving the legs to encourage them to naturally extend when relaxed, so that it does not require energy to keep them held in an aerodynamic position in the air. (Think of how the relaxed state of a bird of prey's talon is closed, not open, to make it easier for them to carry prey.)

Their cardiovascular system is powerful and efficient. They have really well developed pectoral and back muscles that move the wings. In fact, their torso muscles in general are very strong in order to support the wings.

Due to their evolutionary history as a flying species, their organs are relatively small and their bones and joints are structurally quite different than humans. Their joints are optimized for shock absorption and mobility and their bones are a mixture of denser, marrow-filled bones like terrestrial vertebrates and lighter, hollow bones like birds.

They have a higher metabolism than humans; despite their bodies being smaller, they have as much if not more mass than a human of a similar size due to the wings.

The lower back is usually covered by the wings when they are folded, which is why this area is an erogenous zone.

Bird-people don't fly--they evolved away flight in favor of big brains and hands--but the wings play enough of a role in mating and social display that they've stuck around, much like a peacock's tail. Bird-people can, however, glide; there are a lot of gliding events in the Olympics in this world. SHIELD agents typically train to use their wings much more than average people; we see that the beginner class is being taught to use their wings to boost them to a climbing handhold just out of reach. Elite agents like Clint and Natasha also learn to do what is basically a kind of combat hang-gliding. Clint in particular has spent a lot of time training to be able to shoot while gliding, which is tricky since the draw arm going back would cause him to move at an angle. There may in fact actually be key differences in bow design to accommodate firing in the air - similar to how recurve bows could be fired on horseback.

Reproductive Biology, Sex and Gender

The reproductive biology of the bird-people is a mix of bird and reptile traits, plus some riffs on “traditional” omegaverse. It's probably not scientifically plausible for one species to have all these traits at the same time, but I am drawing from real stuff that occurs in nature for the most part.

The challenge that I set myself was to maintain some of the hallmarks of A/B/O fanfic while keeping things at least scientifically plausible enough to meet my own standards for “soft” sci-fi fanfic - basically, that I know the logic behind everything and how it fits together, and nothing is so obviously impossible that it breaks the reader’s suspension of disbelief. (For example, I once read a story where same-sex couples could have kids together through future technology, which I was fine with: what I wasn’t fine with was the story postulating that two cis women could have a cis son, because you can’t put XX and XX together and get XY.)

The A/B/O things I decided I needed to keep for this story to be a trope subversion of omegaverse fic were: male and female alpha and omega genders, heats, omegas being able to bear children, and some kind of mating ritual or behavior inspired by animal behavior. Whereas traditional A/B/O is intended to be vaguely canine, I determined that this universe would be vaguely avian. Since birds and reptiles had a common ancestor, I decided that for the purpose of this story, the bird-people were essentially a third branch on that tree; therefore, I drew from both bird and reptile biology when developing the biology of the bird-people.

The first thing I decided was that there were no “betas” among the bird-people, because I couldn’t figure out a remotely evolutionarily plausible reason for them to exist. The most evolutionarily simple sex arrangements we see in nature tend to be either one or two sexes per species, with or without hermaphroditism of some kind. However, the parameters of A/B/O means that I needed at least four genders: male alpha, male omega, female alpha, and female omega.

The solution I eventually arrived at for this postulates that the bird-people are anatomically identical in terms of their physical organs, and that a mixture of sex hormones determines which sets of organs are fertile. Earlier in their species development, the bird-people were situationally hermaphroditic, with individuals' hormones shifting to alter their fertility in the way most appropriate to their environment. Over time, they stratified into four rough groupings that correspond to the four sexes.

The two primary sex hormones of bird people (roughly corresponding to human testosterone and estrogen) are alphanin and omegon. The groups of sex hormones that regulate fertility are known collectively as "a-factor" and "o-factor." Essentially, people with a-factor levels above a certain point have fertile alpha organs, and people with o-factor levels above a certain point have fertile omega organs. This gives us our four sexes. Think of it kind of like a Punnett square: Aa, Ao, Oa, Oo. Aa people, often called "double-a's", would be called "male alphas" in a traditional A/B/O fic. Oo people, "double-o's", are "female omegas."

Aa: Fertile alpha organs, not enough o-factor naturally for omega fertility. ("Male alphas")

Ao: both alpha and omega organs are fertile, but the person has more a-factor than o-factor. ("Male omegas")

Oa: both alpha and omega organs are fertile, but the person has more o-factor than a-factor. ("Female alphas")

Oo: Fertile omega organs, not enough a-factor naturally for alpha fertility. ("Female omegas."

Whereas humans show fairly pronounced sexual dimorphism as a rule, bird-people do not. Higher levels of o-factor are slightly correlated with higher body fat percentage, so the more o-factor you have, the curvier you tend to be, but for the most part unless they lie pretty far on one end of the spectrum you can't tell someone's sex just by looking at them; you have to smell them. The sexes are distinguishable by smell, though since the sexes exist on a continuum not everyone is easy to identify. An Ao with fairly low o-factor and an Oa with fairly high a-factor would smell pretty similar to one another, for instance, and the Oa at the peak of their A-cycle might smell more A than an Ao at the peak of their O-cycle (more on hormonal cycles later.)

Because everyone is born with essentially the same physical equipment, you can only tell the sex of a prepubescent humavian through measuring their hormone levels, and they can only be partially determined. Prior to the hormone surges of puberty, young are essentially "Ax or Ox" because, while you can tell whether they have more a-factor or o-factor, you can't tell where they will shake out fertility-wise yet. Historically, prior to the first heat/rut cycle, all young bird-people were referred to with a single gender-neutral pronoun. After the development of modern biochemistry, most chicks are sexed as part of their infant health care, but it's still fairly common to call all young "they." Similarly, it is quite usual to use "they" for a person whose sex you don't know. For instance, if you've seen them but not smelled them, or if their smell is ambiguous. (In terms of gender identity, some people identify as Ax, Ox, or Xx their entire lives. It is also possible, though not common, for your hormones to be balanced enough that your biological sex is best described as Xx.)

While I'm on the subject of pronouns: realistically, in this society, pronouns would be quite different than they are in human society. They would either just use one personal pronoun for all possible gender identities, or they would have a minimum of seven pronouns: one each for Aa, Ao, Oa, and Oo, one for Ax, one for Ox, and one for Xx/gender-neutral. In English, the seven-pronoun system would likely shake out thus: Aa: ahim, Ao: ohim, Oa: aher, Oo: oher, Ax: him, Ox: her, Neutral: them.

Because I am writing in English and because this is a fanfic where the human sexes of the characters are known, I have defaulted to using "him" pronouns for Aa, Ao, and Ax and "her" pronouns for Oa, Oo, and Ox. I figured that it was enough to ask the readers to grapple with the new anatomy and societal norms I was introducing without completely remapping pronouns as well.

Because the gender spectrum is so much more anatomically and biochemically fluid than in humans, their culture is quite different when it comes to gender differences. While there are pockets of thought that think that young-bearing genders "belong in the home" (because there are always jerks around looking for reasons to feel superior to other people), overall that kind of discrimination is uncommon on a societal level. This is largely a practical matter - roughly 75% of the population undergoes heat and could theoretically bear young; the bird-people learned pretty early that your society wouldn't get very far if you didn't let three-quarters of your people work/fight/study/etc.

(This doesn't mean that the humavian universe is an egalitarian utopia, by the way; just that other axes of discrimination than gender and sexuality are more problematic.)

Culturally, this also means that the things that are segregated by sex in human society aren't in humavian society. Restrooms, locker rooms, schools, acting roles, fashion, etc., are all unisex. In-universe awards like Grammys, Oscars, etc., are divided by genre rather than gender.

Reproductive anatomy

All the sex organs are internal, so all unaroused bird-people genitals would look fairly similar to cis human female ones until you got pretty close. (Yes, everyone in this universe basically wears panties. There are just a lot of different styles to accommodate various preferences.)

Moving from the front of the body to the back of the body, here is how the reproductive organs are laid out.

The alpha organs include two testicles and an erectile phallus. (Clint refers to his as his "cock.") Unlike human male reproductive organs, the alpha organs are internal.

When flaccid, the phallus is more or less collapsed, and entirely hidden within the genital slit. The interior of the genital slit is self-lubricating (to ease the emergence of the phallus) and very sensitive.

Unlike the human penis, the urethra is not located inside the phallus. Instead, the urethral opening is located at the base. Both sperm and urine travel through the urethra, as in humans. However, instead of traveling through the phallus and emerging from the tip, ejaculate

emerges from the base. There is a channel or groove in the phallus from the urethral opening at the base to the tip. When the phallus is inserted into someone, the groove presses against the side of their body to form a channel for sperm.

Unlike in humans, each ejaculation is from one testicle at a time. Therefore, bird-people can ejaculate twice (once per testicle) before requiring a refractory period.

The omega organs are at the back. Bird-people have a cloaca located between the buttocks, a bit further forward than the human anus and not as far forward as the human vagina. The cloaca serves both omega reproduction and solid waste elimination functions. Imagine a Y: the bottom of the Y is the cloaca, and the stem of the Y is a birth canal-like passage that is more like a vagina than a rectum. It is muscular and very flexible. The opening of the cloaca is naturally tighter than a vaginal opening, due to its excretory function, but it is also very flexible. One of the arms of the Y leads to the uterus, while the other leads to the intestines. The transition to each is guarded by a valve that can seal off its passage. This prevents infection and tubal pregnancy or its equivalent.

Humavian solid waste is very compact and pellet-like, and is encapsulated by mucus in the intestines before being ejected from the body. This helps to keep the cloaca and cloacal passage clean.

O-factor hormones trigger self-lubrication and muscle relaxation in the cloaca and cloacal passage during arousal. This also triggers the valve to the digestive system to close. Yes, that does mean that bird-people can't poop when they're horny. This is likely the basis for many off-color jokes of the humavian universe.

Reproductive Hormones

Humavian fertility is controlled by two groups of hormones collectively referred to as “a-factor” and “o-factor.” Unless the hormones are artificially altered or the person has a hormonal disorder, the a-factor and o-factor cycles in one person will align themselves during puberty so that the highest point in the A cycle occurs at the lowest point in the O cycle, and vice-versa.

The high point of the A cycle is referred to by most people as “rut,” while the high point of the O cycle is called “heat.” The majority of AAs have a low enough level of o-factor that they don’t experience a full-blown heat, while most OOs similarly do not produce enough a-factor to trigger a rut.

People who frequently have sex over a period of time will tend to synchronize their hormone cycles so that one partner’s o-factor peaks when the other’s a-factor peaks. The higher their level of biochemical compatibility, the faster this occurs. Scientists have not determined whether this synchronization causes bonding or is caused by it, but fully bonded couples always synchronize unless there is some sort of medical issue preventing it.

The duration of hormone cycles vary from person to person, with most people having two A-peaks/ruts and two O-peaks/heats a year. These peaks tend to last three days on average, though the duration varies.

When not in rut, sperm production is triggered by exposure to omega pheromones and o-factor hormones. Two AAs in a relationship would likely have very low sperm counts most of the time. However, the ramp-up time for sperm production is quite short once exposed to the hormonal trigger.

Rut is preceded by a short (1-3 day) period of pre-rut, during which time hormone levels build rapidly to peak levels. During rut, sperm production and libido are greatly increased, the person has a greater sensitivity to pheromones, especially mating pheromones, and aggression or possessiveness tend to increase. When rut ends, the a-factor hormones generally return to pre-rut levels in less than a day. However, rut can be prolonged by exposure to pheromones and/or hormones produced by someone who is in heat or pre-heat.

While heat itself is usually only a few days, it is preceded by a longer period of pre-heat that usually lasts between two and four weeks. During pre-heat, a surge in o-factor hormones signals the testicles to shut down sperm production entirely. Bird-people are ovovivparous, which means that instead of laying a shelled egg and incubating it outside the body like birds do, the young develop inside a yolk sac inside the bearing parent and are live born. In contrast, humans are placental live-bearers (the young get their nourishment from the mother over time through the placenta.) So essentially, bird-people who want to reproduce have to basically build up the yolks before fertilization. This occurs during pre-heat. It is quite rare for bird-people to have more than two young in a single clutch due to the physical demands of building up multiple yolk sacs and carrying multiple young. A person in pre-heat's metabolism changes dramatically, as they eat several times more than they normally would and their body packs those nutrients into the yolks with remarkable efficiency. This also means that a humavian who is carrying young (sometimes called "broody" or "egged-up") would "show" from about the middle of pre-heat until the young are born. This is not a comfortable process, and going through pre-heat without sufficient food available is a miserable experience. Because of this, the ability of a mate to provide food to a mate in pre-heat and care for them during the physically awkward pregnancy has long been a key part of mating rituals and has contributed to the eroticizing of feeding between sexually or romantically involved people. The ceremonial feeding in traditional mating ceremonies serves as a symbolic commitment on the part of the mates to provide for each others' needs during the heat cycle.

If conception does not occur during heat, a period of post-heat lasting around a week occurs where the eggs are re-absorbed by the body or, in certain cases, expelled. The post-heat omega has very little appetite during this period, as they are essentially living off the stored nutrients in the eggs. Unfertilized eggs are generally only expelled when something has gone wrong. Some people use hormonal medications to force the eggs to be expelled instead of re-absorbed as a fairly extreme sort of crash diet, but it isn't medically advisable.

Because the hormonal cycle, especially heat, are fairly inconvenient in the modern world, excellent long-acting reversible contraceptives are available for both a-factor and o-factor fertility and most people suppress their cycle unless they are actively trying to have young. These contraceptives even out the hormone cycles enough that the A and O peaks may make people a little extra moody or hungry but generally don't require them to go into seclusion or take leave from work. However, most people are medically advised to have unsuppressed cycles every few years or to have more frequent partially suppressed cycles once a year or so,

because long-term complete suppression is a risk factor for fertility disorders and cancers of the reproductive system. The contraceptives for the A and O factors are independent, and people may suppress one or both as suits their needs. When Clint mentions that he's "double-suppressed," he means he is on contraception for both A and O fertility.

Special Topics in Humavian Reproductive Biology

Because the anatomy is basically the same and which bits are fertile is determined by hormones, gender transition is fairly easy to do with the aid of modern hormone therapies.

Similarly, there are a lot more options in the fertility treatment realm, and I think some people will actually artificially shift their hormones for reproduction purposes and then shift back once the clutch arrives. (For instance, AA or OO couples who don't want to include a third might choose for one of them to supplement the appropriate A or O factor for long enough to induce a fertile cycle.)

Ao and Oa bird-people could theoretically self-fertilize, but I think you'd have to do it with artificial insemination. During pre-heat, omega hormone production shifts so that by the time they have eggs ready for fertilization they're shooting blanks up front.

There are some birds that have documented parthenogenesis (where the young are essentially clones of the mother), so I suspect that *could* happen, but is probably pretty uncommon since genetic diversity would be a concern for the health of the young and subsequent selection for the trait. Parthenogenetic clutches would also be much more likely to be non-viable and are likely even more uncommon in modern times when the hormonal disorders that would trigger it are usually treated.

Society

Flock

Flocks are close-knit social groups that are highly valued in humavian society. While members of a flock are friends, the relationship of a flock is distinguished by the depth and long-lasting nature of the relationships - "found family" is a great human expression that has similar meaning to what flock is.

Flock tends to engage in more intimate social behaviors with each other, close to what you'd find with family members (you'll notice Natasha grooming Clint sometimes). Sometimes your flock might be your immediate family plus some close friends. Strike Team Delta is flock. The Howling Commandos were flock. Tony, Pepper, Happy, and Rhodey are flock. It's a bond that grows from trust, communication, proximity, and compatibility. The bond usually (though not always) lasts for a really long time, often the rest of the members' lives.

(The team from Leverage are flock. The Scoobies from BTVS are flock. I could go on, heh.)

You might also be part of more than one flock, and the two may not overlap. This is most usually situations like your childhood/family flock and the flock you form as an adult, or a flock you form with members of your military unit during a deployment. Flock has very

strong societal significance but being flock doesn't given you a legal relationship unless you deliberately establish one through some other mechanism (powers of attorney, adoption, etc.)

Display

Display has a central role in humavian social interaction. Similar to in birds, displays are linked to arousal, aggression, and courting behavior. The primary avenues for display are the wings and crest, and to a lesser extent body posture.

Crest display is less conscious, usually, more like facial expressions where unless you are purposefully paying attention to keeping it under control it will naturally reflect your state of mind. "Getting cresty" is the expression in this universe that refers to the lifting of the crest feathers, and can indicate flirtatiousness, aggression/threat, or a blend of the two; the actual meaning is made clear by accompanying signals of vocal tone, facial expression, and pheromone profile.

Clint's crest naturally grows in kind of spiky, and he also gets cresty very easily. By contrast, Phil's crest is naturally short and dense, so that even when he does get cresty it isn't very noticeable unless you are very close, very observant, and/or know him very well. This certainly helps him cultivate his rep for being calm and unflappable.

Display involving the wings is more deliberate and is nearly always either dominance posturing or mating display. It involves spreading the wings out and/or up, to display the plumage and make the person look larger and take up more room. Often, the arms are also outspread, head up and crest lifted, chest out, body posture very upright. There are formal "display suits" that are cut so that the open edge can attach to the cuff, so that when the arms are outstretched the jacket opens, revealing a vivid lining chosen to compliment the under-wing plumage. They are generally worn for formal or momentous occasions.

Unless you are actually either gunning for a fight or doing a formal mate display, most wing displays in modern times are partial displays that involve fluffing the wings out just enough to take up more room and flash a little feather (think "manspreading" when it's a dominance posture; when it's related to attraction it's more like heavy flirting.)

The other main instance where you see full wing display is theatrical performances. Models in fashion shows usually display at the end of the runway, and performers display at the end of a performance rather than "taking a bow."

Phil cultivates a calm persona at work and doesn't engage in the more casual posturing displays that many people do. Additionally, he always keeps the most unusual and lovely part of his plumage tucked away. He does this on purpose, for professional reasons—the "just a guy in a suit" personal that serves him well in his career. However, because of this, his formal display for Clint becomes ALL THE MORE IMPRESSIVE, because he really is showing how much Clint matters to him. It's also quite a surprise for the rank-and-file people at SHIELD who never understood why he was such a big deal, because his display is really impressive.

Pheromones and Scent

The humavians use scent much more than humans do for social interaction. While you can learn to control your facial expressions and even to some extent your crest, it is nearly impossible to consciously, completely control your scent. You can learn to reduce or minimize the amount of scent you put out, but not what kind. It is common, and considered courteous, to use scent-dampening products when in your workplace, shopping, etc. Commercially available scent-dampeners do not eliminate scent, just make it less strong, and are often combined with fragrances designed to compliment one's natural scents. The idea is not to hide your pheromones, since they are used extensively in communication, but to make it easier for humavians to exist in high-density environments by lowering the potency of scent so that it can be perceived by people in conversation distance but not by everyone in the room.

The exception to the "dampen your scent in public" convention is during periods when people are biochemically bonding; immediately following mating and immediately after the arrival of a clutch are the two biggest examples, times when you don't want to interfere at all with your natural biochemistry.

Sometimes the natural pheromone production is intense enough that it overcomes dampeners. In general, cases like Clint's mating pheromones kicking into high gear after Phil's display are seen by most people as sweet/endearing (it's the kind of thing that would make you say "awwwww") but it's also polite to go somewhere more private once you realize it's happening. Lusty or aggressive pheromones are more likely to be taken badly; if you let this kind of scent get overpowering, people assume you're either dangerously out of control or doing it on purpose as an aggressive move, with certain exceptions. For instance, it's acceptable to let your lust pheromones fly when you're out lekking, and professional fighters use their aggression pheromones to pump themselves up and intimidate their opponents.

In the field, SHIELD makes extensive use of more potent scent-dampeners that can nearly eliminate an agent's scent, which are also used in conjunction with artificial pheromones in undercover work. Phil has a strong ability to suppress his own pheromones and tends to use a fairly strong dampener, only letting enough scent through to prevent himself from putting people off (people who don't smell like anything seem creepy and unnatural to other humavians, in a sort of olfactory uncanny valley effect.)

During her time with the Red Room, Natasha gained the ability (through canon-typical evil mad science experimentation) to deliberately shift her pheromones in order to present the scent profile she wishes to present. Natasha's hormones are also very easy to shift (probably due to the same evil mad science) and, once shifted, tend to stay at those levels for a full cycle. She officially identifies as Ox. The information about her physical changes due to the Red Room is very highly classified.

Sex and Romance

Mating arrangements vary a lot from person to person and between subcultures; some people want to essentially mate one other person for life, some are serial monogamists, some form polyfidelitous mate groups, some mate relationships are exclusive and some are open, etc. Mating is a commitment but is assumed to have the duration of mutual agreement instead of

"for life" - you'll note the "as long as we both still want to" wording in the mate-meal ceremony. There are regional and cultural variations as well as just individual preferences.

Due to the gender fluidity of the species, society is much more equitable about things like parental leave, reproductive health, and the like. And historically, the way that matings were arranged had a lot more variation as well. Likely most inherited wealth/title went by age rather than gender, and political matings were done by everyone, not just bearing sexes.

Tribute

Tribute, or courtship gifts, originated as a way to prove to a prospective mate that one had the ability and the will to take care of their needs by providing plentiful food, physical defense when vulnerable, and a safe and comfortable home. (This is because bird courting gifts in real life are usually either food or nesting materials.) Over time, the “gifts of nest and nourishment” have become more abstracted. There are clear intent (and explicit consent) elements involved in tribute offerings. The presentation of tribute has three parts, though they are often elided or combined in less formal circumstances:

First, the person who wishes to pursue a romantic/sexual connection offers the tribute to the person they are interested in.

This person may either decline the tribute or accept it. If they decline, the offeror should accept the no gracefully. If they accept, they indicate a willingness to hear what the offeror wants.

The offeror then makes their request, which is usually an invitation for a date but could also be an invitation for a hookup.

There are a lot of ways this plays out; Agent Oatmeal Raisin Bar might have had success with that approach in the past if everyone involved was looking for something no-strings. The pilot with the pie is making kind of a pro forma effort- he knows he has to offer tribute so he does but he hasn’t given it much thought or taken much trouble because he likely doesn’t know Agent Mendez that well, just thinks she’s cool and he’d like to know her better. Whereas Dennis is doing the equivalent of asking someone out with flowers and chocolates: they’re nice to get but kind of cliched and shows that he did think about it some but not enough to get something that is tailored to Clint specifically instead of “a date” in general. Bobbi did a lot better; state fair/circus midway food is comfort food for Clint, so that corn dog was actually really good tribute that showed she had taken the time to learn some things about what he liked before making a approach.

Earlier in humavian history, tribute was presented over time, starting with small tokens, and the acceptance of each was a way for the person being pursued to pace the pursuit to their liking. The sequential tribute acted as a series of gates, where by accepting one, tacit permission was granted for another to be offered. The pursued could end things without having to offer a direct rejection to a suitor by the smaller, lower-stakes rejection of a tribute offering. When the pursued was won over (either by the patience of their suitor, by the quality of their gifts, or other factors), they would signal their openness to hearing a proposal by using one of the tribute gifts in public, in the presence of the suitor.

In modern times, a variant of sequential tribute is considered a romantic way to present a courting suit, especially if one wishes to establish from the outset that one's intentions are serious and geared toward forming a mating relationship. This variant involves the presentation of tribute gifts over time, with each acceptance followed not by an invitation/proposal but with another tribute gift. Finally, when explicitly invited to do so, the potential suitor will formally offer their suit, initiating a period of courting.

Differences Between Types of Humavian Sexual and/or Romantic Relationships, With Comparison to The Human Equivalents (and Some Bonus Vocabulary)

Human - going to the club, looking to hook up, etc.

Humavian - lekking - mutual hookups, no tribute, everyone displays/pairs off, expectation is casual sex. Often happens at clubs though sometimes at parties or maybe other public places (the mall? Music festivals?) Most of what Clint has done since he broke up with Bobbi was lekking and he never lekked with anyone at work. What Clint remembers from his hookups in the circus was somewhere in between lekking and dating: since instead of a large group of people who are all looking, there were multiple people trying to catch Clint's attention, they brought tribute to him, hoping to win out over the competition.

Human - casual dating, dating where you are open to it becoming more but you haven't already decided you want Something Serious - dating for companionship/sex mostly, not ready to settle down yet.

Humavian - dating. As opposed to lekking, when you want to ask someone out for either a single or potentially recurring casual dates, it is expected that you will present a courtship gift, or tribute, with or without some level of display. Casual tribute offers are nearly always made in person, with the expectation of immediate response. Dates that involve eating alone together are considered more "serious" and/or erotically charged. Inviting someone to dinner as a first date is very forward/bold and inviting them to your place for dinner is essentially saying "let's fuck."

Human - serious dating, going steady, dating with marriage in mind

Humavian - courting. A person who is courting you is referred to as a suitor and would refer to you as their courted. Courting is formally initiated by the presentation and acceptance of the suit, usually through tribute and display, more elaborate than that used for dating and less elaborate than that used for mating. A more old-fashioned style of sequential tribute is often used to present a courting suit, and is considered romantic by many; sequential-tribute-courting is a romance novel and movie staple. While monogamy is not an assumed part of courting due to the frequency of polygamy in humavian culture, if you accept a suit it is assumed that your suitor's invitations, etc., will take priority over lesser social invitations (dates, etc.). Additionally, courtship doesn't have a prescribed length but it is not considered an indefinite state; courtship will end in the suitor and courted either becoming mates, deciding to casually date instead, or deciding not to remain romantically involved.

Human - moving in together, cohabiting

Humavian - nesting - nesting is socially seen as a serious sign of commitment that implies a couple are likely to become mates if they aren't already, although not all mates nest first or ever.

Human - bed, bedroom

Humavian - nest

Human - house, apartment

Humavian- bower

Human - apartment building, dorm, barracks

Humavian - colony, colony building

Human - engagement/betrothal/common-law marriage

Humavian - mating - mates are individuals who have entered into a committed, romantic and sexual (except in cases of aro/ace people) life partnership. Mating is proposed by some level of formal display, which generally takes place in front of other people. It is considered an indicator of seriousness and respect to do one's mate display in front of people that you and your courted hold in high esteem and/or who have a high level of social power in your community. Mate groups can be monogamous, polyamorous, or move between both states at different times. Mating is not a legal status but a social one; there is a separate process to register your life partnership(s) with the government for purposes of custody, inheritance, taxes, etc. Since mating is not government-ratified, there is a ceremony by which the intended mates affirm their decision (the mate-meal). Mate-meals are held in private but often celebrated afterward with mating parties (kind of a like a wedding reception.) The experience of the mate-meal ceremony tends to heighten bonding and sex hormones. Dissolving a mate grouping is similar to breaking off an engagement would be for humans - it doesn't require legal steps like divorce would, but it's a social Big Deal and tends to be pretty traumatic in most cases unless the decision is truly mutual. Clint and Bobbi were mated but not bonded.

Human - no real human equivalent, some crossover with "old married couple" (positive connotation) or "soulmates" (to indicate deep compatibility)

Birdman - bonding - this is a biological process that happens where mates develop a biochemical bond over time. Bonded mates are more fertile, more attuned to each other, and experience heightened hormonal release related to sex and bonding which makes pair-bond-reinforcing activities more effective and pleasurable. Bonded mates' own pheromone profiles shift and become more like one another. Bonded mates are better able to read even very subtle pheromonal cues from each other.

Human - legal marriage

Birdman - Civil partnership paperwork. Can be done for groups of multiple people, is not automatic or assumed upon mating, not all members of a mate grouping may have civil paperwork with all other members. Paperwork is usually done for pragmatic reasons, such as

making it easier to have joint finances, ensure custody of young, or put someone on your benefits. Sometimes members of a flock will file civil partnership papers together, even if not romantically or sexually involved.

Fashion

Lower-body clothes are quite similar to humans, though due to the legacy of flying/gliding skirts are less common (or are worn with shorts or leggings underneath for modesty.) Upper-body clothes are naturally quite different, as they must account for the wings. The wings are too large to easily pull anything over, so any garment that fits around the wings has to have a fastening.

For casual/warm weather wear, a lot of humavians wear backless/low backed styles like halter tops.

For colder weather and more formal clothes, the top "half" of a garment - from the neck to just under the armpit - and the front of the garment are constructed the same way the corresponding human garment would be. Then there is an opening, constructed essentially like a cuff or collar, that fits around the base of the wings, and the garment wraps around and fastens at the lower back. This fastening is, in modern times, usually something that is easy for people to do up themselves, like a tie, velcro, hooks, or snaps. Some clothes may have a zipper, but usually that's garments like dresses that zip up the back. These closures are usually invisible, being covered by the wings when they are held folded (as they are most of the time.)

Formal, tailored clothes, like Phil's shirts and suits, use buttons, and they are done up with the aid of buttonhooks, just like Victorian ladies' shoes. Generally, the more formal the garment, the closer to the wing-base the cuff is tailored. The cuffs are usually also lined in silk or something similar so they don't irritate the feathers. A close-fitting wing cuff that still allows full range of motion is a sign of exquisite custom tailoring.

The top layer in winter is still a heavy cloak in cold climates, because it can cover and insulate the wings. Coats are for when the temperature is okay for the wings (with their insulating feathers) but too cold for the body.

On a side note, because the small of the back is almost always covered, both by clothing and by the folded wings, it's considered a very intimate and usually erotic part of the body. Generally, very few people would see or touch it.

Food

They are omnivorous but their diet is influenced by that of birds. They eat a lot of nuts, seeds, and berries in addition to meat and vegetables. They do eat (non-intelligent normal) birds sometimes, but the favored protein sources are fish and other seafood, rabbit, large rodents like nutria, and insects.

End Notes

Thanks for taking a chance on this weird-ass AU! I really appreciate it. And feel free to hit me up if you have questions, because my search history is SO STRANGE now and I have a LOT of notes, hah.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!